

# Engaging caregivers when addressing sexual behaviors



## in children A Tip Sheet For Professionals

### *Advice from Caregivers*

#### Who may benefit from this information?

Any person that engages with children and families may benefit from this information.



**Therapists**



**Medical  
Workers**



**Child Welfare  
Workers &  
Advocacy Centers**



**Law  
Enforcement**



**School  
Personnel**



## What are problematic sexual behaviors?

- Children and youth exhibit a range of sexual behavior from typical to concerning to problematic to illegal. Typical sexual behavior tends to be exploratory, occurs spontaneously between similar aged peers who are functioning at the same level, responds to intervention, and is not associated with strong emotions. When those criteria are not met, the behavior may be concerning and in need of intervention.
- Problematic sexual behavior in children and youth is defined as behavior initiated by children and youth under the age of 18 that involves using sexual body parts in a manner that is developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful to the individual or individuals impacted by the behavior. Problematic sexual behavior acts may involve use of fear, force, or coercion and may include showing, looking, touching, and/or penetration of sexual body parts. Depending on the age, act, and jurisdiction, these behaviors may be illegal. The sexual behaviors could be online through texting, social media, games, or other electronic means.
- Problematic sexual behaviors in children are not limited to any particular group of children or gender. Problematic sexual behaviors occur in children across age ranges, socioeconomic (income) levels, cultural groups, living circumstances, and family structures.
- Unfortunately, most people (professionals and caregivers) do not have a solid foundational understanding of healthy sexual development. Having a solid understanding and a plan for how to respond can greatly improve how a family experiences important moments in their life.

For more information about the continuum of sexual behavior, please visit:

[www.ncsby.org](http://www.ncsby.org)





# You are critical in helping families.

You and the job you are doing matter. When a family learns that their child has engaged in problematic or illegal sexual behavior, they may experience a range of emotions. The family may feel like they are in crisis. What you say and do matters deeply during this time. The words you use may build up or break down barriers. The youth are not scary “delinquents.” These are kids who have made bad choices regarding their own behavior that may have harmed other children.

You are also critical in encouraging change at a higher level. Talk to your colleagues about this work. Share this newsletter. It may help a family and child more than you could ever know.

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**You can create change.  
You can make a difference.  
You may be the only one to  
empower this person.**

## Tips for engaging families:

*Insights from caregivers*

- **Open the door and give us space to hear our story.** Caregivers will be more likely to trust and open up when they know you truly care about them and take the time to hear their story.
- Strive to give the overall message that **you are here to help.**
- **Assume the best about our child, not the worst.** Above all, remember that we are people and this is a child.

# Empathize with caregivers.



Talking to children about sexual behaviors can be an uncomfortable conversation for caregivers.

For a caregivers survival guide tipsheet, please visit:  
[www.ncsby.org](http://www.ncsby.org)



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**“No parent really wants to end up talking to a law enforcement officer or child welfare worker about their child, so this is probably anxiety provoking for them to even have this conversation.”**



## Tips for communicating empathy:

- **Make eye contact and be aware of body language.**
  - » The more comfortable you are with a family, the more comfortable they will be with you.
- **Validate the feelings the caregiver may be experiencing.**
  - » You are not expected to make the feelings disappear. Often, it is just helpful to hear that you understand how hard this can be.
- **Seek opportunity to grow and empower the caregiver.**
  - » While a caregiver may feel lost in this moment, they likely hold beneficial information about their child that can help guide next steps.
- **Offer practical tips without judgement.**
  - » It may be useful to offer language on how to have conversations with children and youth about sexual behavior. While a conversation may not be able to happen right away, long-term, the caregiver will be responsible for providing information to the child about their sexual development.



## Intervention AND prevention is key.

The words you use may differ based on your profession. For example, doctors may be able to say things or ask questions that teachers cannot.

Regardless of your role, talk to caregivers about ways to keep their kids safe. Conversation about sexual development and boundaries can be included as preventative steps as opposed to only intervention steps

### Consider these conversation starters for prevention and intervention measures:

- » "Have you talked about Private Part or Sexual Behavior Rules with your kids yet?"
- » "What do you call private parts?"
- » "What safe person or support could you talk to when you have sexual questions that come up?"





# Create safety by normalizing the conversation.

Sexual development starts in infancy, so conversations to support healthy development needs to start at a young age and continue throughout childhood and adolescence.

## Consider the following verbiage:

- » "Things are happening this day and age where kids are seeing more stuff, and engaging in more sexual behaviors. If you have any questions, or you're concerned about their sexual activity or their behaviors, go look at this website ([ncsby.org](http://ncsby.org))."
- » "I want to give you this link for body safety for your kid at this age."

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**I think if more people did that (talk with families about sexual development and sexual abuse) it wouldn't be so taboo to discuss this topic.”**

It would be most helpful if these things were incorporated during regular appointments as prevention, not just as intervention. For example, a pediatrician may check in about a child's sexual behavior as they do their physical behavior during a well child visit. If a caregiver reports a behavior that may be concerning or problematic, open the door for them to share more.

# Use consistent and evidenced based resources.



There are a number of myths and misconceptions surrounding youth who have exhibited problematic sexual behavior. These include such things as believing these children and youth are not safe in their home, school, or community setting, that they must receive services in a high level of care facility, and more. However, research would show that most children and youth who have engaged with problematic sexual behavior can be effectively served in services that allow them to stay in their environments.

Offer reliable and effective resources for this behavior as many families will benefit from a conversation about sexual development in their children. Have a plan to identify with a caregiver if a behavior is inappropriate or problematic. Then, work with the caregiver to help get the child back on track.

Know that there is effective treatment for children and youth who have engaged in problematic sexual behavior.

## Resources:

- [National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth | www.ncsby.org](http://www.ncsby.org)
- [Stop it Now | www.stopitnow.org](http://www.stopitnow.org)
- [Access resources from local child advocacy centers | www.nationalchildrensalliance.org](http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org)

For more information on helping caregivers find evidence-based treatment please visit:  
[www.ncsby.org](http://www.ncsby.org)





# Streamline the process of getting direct help.

## Have a plan.

There are effective services for working with problematic sexual behavior of youth. Create a partnership with a few providers in your community including ones who do this work and connect families to them. If needed, work together with professionals in the community to determine the cause of delays in getting families to services. If possible, reduce time between the investigation and determination of adjudication if that is the path taken. Consider rehabilitation/habilitation paths whenever possible.

Possible Helpful Responses	Possible Unhelpful Responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Provide opportunities for the caregiver to have a voice and understand that each situation is unique</li><li>✓ Check in with caregivers and ask how they are doing</li><li>✓ Give the message that you are there to help</li><li>✓ Use open body language</li><li>✓ Use the term “problematic sexual behavior” and separate the behavior from the child</li><li>✓ Collaborate with other professionals involved to streamline services</li><li>✓ Create a safety plan with the caregiver to keep all children in the home safe</li><li>✓ Try to allow for prosocial activities with eyes on supervision</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✗ Not giving the family space to share their story</li><li>✗ Assuming the worst about the child or caregiver</li><li>✗ Using terms like “offender, perpetrator, abuser”</li><li>✗ Removing all activities from families in all circumstances</li><li>✗ Having legal meetings in the school or public setting consistently</li><li>✗ Using various facial expressions and body language that communicate discomfort or judgment</li><li>✗ Having varied responses</li></ul>



# Concluding Thoughts



This guide was written for professionals to assist you in supporting children, youth, and caregivers who are coping with concerns of PSBs. We write this series of newsletters to share support, to let you know how important it is for you to give hope. It is produced by caregivers of children and adolescents who have had problematic or illegal sexual behavior. We have experienced and understand the impact of children's problematic sexual behaviors on caregivers, youth, the other children, the family, and others. For this issue, we have focused on information to assist professionals as they work with families impacted by problematic sexual behaviors. We hope this guide is a helpful resource.

Sincerely,

*The Caregiver Partnership Board*



## NCSBY

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