### Sexual Behaviours in Children & Young People

#### 1. Identify

Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people helps adults to support the development of healthy sexuality and protect young people from harm or abuse.

Sexuality is integral to a person’s identity and develops throughout life. It is natural for children and young people to express their sexuality through a variety of ways such as play and relationships and relates to the stage of development. Sexual behaviours are not just about sex. They include any talk, touch, questions, conversations and interactions which relate to sexuality and relationships.

When children or young people display sexual behaviour which increases their vulnerability or causes harm to others, adults have a responsibility to take action to provide support and protection.

Children and young people who have a disability, have been abused or have experienced other disruptions to their development or socialisation, may be at increased risk of sexual behaviours that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous, curious, mutual, light hearted and easily diverted experimentation or of developing unusual or harmful sexual behaviours. Adults who care for these young people have a duty of care to provide relevant information and support.

Sexual development is influenced by many factors. Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours that are normal, concerning or harmful, it is necessary to consider the current social, cultural and familial context.

The chart on the next page lists specific examples of green, orange and red light sexual behaviors at various ages. These are examples only and must be considered in context. Take into account the age and ability level of the child, young person and others involved as well as the situation, frequency and nature of the behaviour.

Use the traffic lights framework to identify the characteristics of the behaviour and the way it occurs and then follow steps 2 and 3 to understand and respond. All green, orange and red behaviours require some level of information, support and protective response.

| green | sexual behaviours that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous, curious, mutual, light hearted and easily diverted experimentation provide opportunities to talk, explain and support |
| orange | sexual behaviours that are outside normal behaviour in terms of persistence, frequency or inequality in age, power or ability signal the need to monitor and provide extra support |
| red | sexual behaviours that are problematic or harmful, forceful, coercive, compulsive, deceptive or degrading signal the need to provide immediate protection and follow up support |

#### What is the behaviour? green, orange or red?

Sexual development is influenced by many factors. Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours that are normal, concerning or harmful has a significant influence on their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors. When using the traffic lights framework to establish whether the sexual behaviour of children or young people is normal, concerning or harmful, it is necessary to consider the current social, cultural and familial context.

The chart on the next page lists specific examples of green, orange and red light sexual behaviors at various ages. These are examples only and must be considered in context. Take into account the age and ability level of the child, young person and others involved as well as the situation, frequency and nature of the behaviour.

Use the traffic lights framework to identify the characteristics of the behaviour and the way it occurs and then follow steps 2 and 3 to understand and respond. All green, orange and red behaviours require some level of information, support and protective response.

#### Using the traffic lights framework to identify the characteristics of the behaviour

1. **Identify**

   Use the traffic lights framework to identify the characteristics of the behaviour and the way it occurs and then follow steps 2 and 3 to understand and respond. All green, orange and red behaviours require some level of information, support and protective response.

2. **Understand**

3. **Respond**

   Sexual behaviours that are problematic or harmful, forceful, coercive, compulsive, deceptive or degrading signal the need to provide immediate protection and follow up support.

   Sexual behaviours that are outside normal behaviour in terms of persistence, frequency or inequality in age, power or ability signal the need to monitor and provide extra support.

   Sexual behaviours that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous, curious, mutual, light hearted and easily diverted experimentation provide opportunities to talk, explain and support.

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**Note:** The information provided is a guide and should be used in conjunction with professional advice where necessary. Always seek advice from a qualified professional or support service if you have concerns about the sexual development or wellbeing of children or young people.
2. UNDERSTAND

What the behaviour is telling you

Children show their needs and wants through their behaviours. Understanding the reason behind a child’s or young person’s sexual behaviour will help adults to better support children and young people. As with any behaviour, understanding why a child or young person is doing what they are doing can help you understand the child or young person better and guide you in working out what help is needed.

Q1. What are the issues or concerns regarding the child or young person and their behaviour?

When sexual behaviours are identified as concerning or harmful, it is essential to think about why the child or young person is engaging in the sexual behaviour and the way it happens, all of which will help you understand what is going on for the child and indicate what is needed.

Q2. What might these concerns indicate?

- lack of accurate sexuality information
- lack of social skills
- medical needs
- conflict in relationships
- confusion about sexuality, relationships and sexual activities
- lack of rules and consequences
- lack of information about the risks of the behaviour
- overexposure to explicit sexual activity and materials
- lack of adult supervision and support
- experience of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect
- lack of consistency across environments
- anxiety about adult or family relationships
- curriculum focused on sexuality and the issues that may be contributing to the behaviour

Expressing sexuality through sexual behaviour is a natural, healthy and basic aspect of being human. Sexual behaviour which makes children or young people vulnerable or causes harm to another requires adult intervention to provide support and protection. All children and young people have the right to be safe.

RED

Sexual behaviour which indicate or cause harm because they are:
- excessive, compulsive, coercive, forceful, degrading or transgressing
- secret, manipulative or intrusive
- not appropriate for the age and stage of development
- between children with a significant difference in age, development, ability or power
- sexual behaviour required the need to provide immediate protection and follow up support

ORANGE

Sexual behaviour which cause concern because of:
- frequency or duration of behaviours
- risk to the safety or development of the child or young person
- risk to the health and safety of others
- sexual behaviour in conflict with the child or young person’s values or beliefs

These behaviours signal the need to monitor and provide extra support.

GREEN

Sexual behaviour which are part of normal and healthy:
- curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- increased sense of privacy about bodies
- growing need for privacy
- preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or preoccupied with sexuality
- oral sex and/or intercourse with a known partner
- explicit communications, art or actions which are appropriate to the child’s age and stage of development
- masturbation in private
- use of sexual language
- explicit sexual talk, art or play
- disclosing of sexual abuse
- touching the genitals/private parts
- persistent questions about sexuality despite awareness
- possessing, accessing or sending child sexual materials
- sexual activity in exchange for money, goods or services
- sexual activity in exchange for mobile phone and internet
- sexual contact with others of significant age difference
- sexual contact with animals
- oral sex and/or intercourse with known partner
- touching the genitals/private parts of animals
- explicit sexual talk, art or play
- disclosing of sexual abuse
- touching the genitals/private parts
- sexual behaviour with significantly younger or older children
- sexual behaviour with non-consenting children
- sexual behaviour which is coercive, forceful or degrading
- sexual behaviour with vulnerable children
- sexual behaviour with no or little development and age appropriateness
- sexual behaviour which causes or may cause harm
- sexual behaviour which is necessary or appropriate
- sexual behaviour which is not an issue
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0 to 4 years</th>
<th>5 to 9 years</th>
<th>10 to 14 years</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• compulsive masturbation which may be self</td>
<td>• compulsive masturbation e.g. self injuring,</td>
<td>• compulsive masturbation e.g. self injuring,</td>
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<tr>
<td>injurious, of a persistent nature or duration</td>
<td>self harming, seeking an audience</td>
<td>self harming, seeking an audience</td>
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<td>• persistent explicit sexual themes in talk,</td>
<td>• disclosure of sexual abuse</td>
<td>• disclosure of sexual abuse</td>
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<tr>
<td>• art, or play</td>
<td>• persistent bullying involving sexual aggression</td>
<td>• persistent bullying involving sexual aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td>• disclosure of sexual abuse</td>
<td>e.g. pushing/lifting/removing other children’s clothing,</td>
<td>e.g. pushing/lifting/removing other children’s clothing,</td>
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<tr>
<td>• simulation of sexual touch or sexual activity</td>
<td>threatening notes, drawing, text messages</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• persistently touching the genitals/private</td>
<td>• sexual behaviour with significantly younger or</td>
<td>• sexual behaviour with significantly younger or</td>
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<tr>
<td>• parts of others</td>
<td>less able children</td>
<td>less able children</td>
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<tr>
<td>• forced or coercing other children to engage in</td>
<td>• accessing the rooms of sleeping children to</td>
<td>• accessing the rooms of sleeping children to</td>
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<tr>
<td>• sexual behaviour between young children</td>
<td>touch or engage in sexual activity</td>
<td>touch or engage in sexual activity</td>
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<td>• involving penetration with objects, sexual</td>
<td>• simulation of, or participation in, sexual activities</td>
<td>• simulation of, or participation in, sexual activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e.g. oral sex, sexual intercourse</td>
<td>e.g. oral sex, sexual intercourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>• presence of a sexually transmitted infection</td>
<td>• presence of a sexually transmitted infection</td>
<td>• presence of a sexually transmitted infection</td>
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<tr>
<td>• persistent sexual activity with animals</td>
<td>• persistent sexual activity with animals</td>
<td>• persistent sexual activity with animals</td>
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<tr>
<td>• using mobile phones and internet which includes</td>
<td>• using mobile phones and internet which includes</td>
<td>• using mobile phones and internet which includes</td>
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<tr>
<td>giving out identifying details or sexual images</td>
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WHAT DO YOU THINK? green, orange or red?

Use the traffic lights framework to identify these scenarios

1. Harry, aged 8, masturbates for most of the day at school. When questioned, he will often express his joys to the rest of the class.

2. Tanya, aged 13, spends a lot of time alone in her bedroom with the door closed. When her mum knocks on the door, she will ask her to go away. Recently she has been saying unkind things about herself and Pickup Dolls. She told her friends that she was going to kill herself.

3. Sally, aged 15, often talks to her her mum’s young friends. When her mum asks her about them she will talk about their bodies and says it is OK for them to be seen. Sometimes she likes to watch them for hours and says she is seeking a pop sex.

4. Alex, aged 16, spends lots of time chatting to friends on the Internet. Recently, she made a new friend, “Sissy Boy” online. She then chats to him and finds about asking for his number to meet in person. Alex talks to a friend about it.

5. Matthew and Nicholas, both aged 4, are playing in the cubby house and have both taken their underpants off. They are looking at and touching each other’s genitalia.

6. Harper, aged 3, tells her teacher that she has seen Lucas, aged 13, touching her best friend Cindi’s vagina.

7. Troy, aged 14, overhears his older cousin friends about having intercourse and with what her boyfriend is a 15 year old at the same school. He tells them that she is sexy.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Talking about concerns helps prevent harm or abuse.

Parentline: 1300 30 1300

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Relationships Australia: 1300 364 277

1800Respect Online: 1800 737 732

Child Safety Services (Qld): 1800 177 135

Contact Child Protection or Police Services in your state or territory if a child or adult requires protection from harm.

For more information about other traffic lights resources and training, contact us at:

Phone: 07 3250 0240

www.fpq.com.au
### 10 to 13 Years

- Compulsive masturbation e.g. self-harming, in public, seeking an audience
- Persistent explicit talk, art or play which is sexual or sexually stimulating
- Accessing age-restricted materials e.g. movies, games, internet with sexually explicit content
- Persistent expression of fear of sexually transmitted infection or pregnancy
- Marked changes in behaviour e.g. older or adult children engaging in sexual activities with older children or adults in preference to peers
- Engaging in sexual activities with an unknown peer e.g. deep kissing, mutual masturbation
- Oral sex and/or intercourse with a known partner of similar age and developmental ability
- Using mobile phones and internet with unknown people which may include giving out identifying details

### 14 to 17 Years

- Sexual preoccupation which interferes with daily function
- Intentional exposing on others while they are engaged in sexual activity or nudity
- Explicit communications, art or actions which are obscene or sexually stimulating
- Repeated exposure of private parts in a public place with peers e.g. flashing
- Engaging in sexual activity with someone of the same or different age, developmental ability and/or gender
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials e.g. photos of children naked or in sexual activities
- Sexual activity with a partner of similar age and developmental ability (ability to consent must be considered)
- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers

### Preoccupation with Sexual Behaviours

- Interest in body parts and functions
- Unselfconscious masturbation
- Comfort in being nude
- Sexually explicit material
- Inappropriate use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers
- Curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- Use of sexual language
- Interest and/or participation in girlfriend or boyfriend relationships
- Hugging, kissing, touching with known peers
- Embarrassment amongst same-age peers within the context of play e.g. occasional wearing or undressing
- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- Compulsive masturbation e.g. self-harming, in public, seeking an audience
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials e.g. photos of children naked or in sexual activities
- Sexual contact with others of significant age and/or developmental difference
- Engaging in sexual activity by using grooming techniques e.g. gifts, manipulation, lies
- Deliberately sending and/or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- Arranging a meeting with an online acquaintance
- Engaging in sexual activities with someone of the same or different age, developmental ability
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials

### Discrepancy between Sexual Interest and Preoccupation with Sexual Behaviours

- Interest in body parts and functions
- Unselfconscious masturbation
- Comfort in being nude
- Sexually explicit material
- Inappropriate use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers
- Curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- Use of sexual language
- Interest and/or participation in girlfriend or boyfriend relationships
- Hugging, kissing, touching with known peers
- Embarrassment amongst same-age peers within the context of play e.g. occasional wearing or undressing
- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- Compulsive masturbation e.g. self-harming, in public, seeking an audience
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials e.g. photos of children naked or in sexual activities
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- Arranging a meeting with an online acquaintance
- Engaging in sexual activities with someone of the same or different age, developmental ability
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials

### Presence of Sexually Transmitted Infection or Unplanned Pregnancy

- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers
- Curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- Use of sexual language
- Interest and/or participation in girlfriend or boyfriend relationships
- Hugging, kissing, touching with known peers
- Embarrassment amongst same-age peers within the context of play e.g. occasional wearing or undressing
- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- Compulsive masturbation e.g. self-harming, in public, seeking an audience
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials e.g. photos of children naked or in sexual activities
- Sexual contact with others of significant age and/or developmental difference
- Engaging in sexual activity by using grooming techniques e.g. gifts, manipulation, lies
- Deliberately sending and/or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- Arranging a meeting with an online acquaintance
- Engaging in sexual activities with someone of the same or different age, developmental ability
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials

### Sexual Activity in Exchange for Money or Goods

- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers
- Curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- Use of sexual language
- Interest and/or participation in girlfriend or boyfriend relationships
- Hugging, kissing, touching with known peers
- Embarrassment amongst same-age peers within the context of play e.g. occasional wearing or undressing
- Use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers
- Compulsive masturbation e.g. self-harming, in public, seeking an audience
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials e.g. photos of children naked or in sexual activities
- Sexual contact with others of significant age and/or developmental difference
- Engaging in sexual activity by using grooming techniques e.g. gifts, manipulation, lies
- Deliberately sending and/or publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- Arranging a meeting with an online acquaintance
- Engaging in sexual activities with someone of the same or different age, developmental ability
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive and/or exploitative materials

### Early Developmental Continuity Care 9-5
3. RESPOND

When you can do to address the child’s needs
All behaviour has a function. When adults understand why the behaviour may be occurring, they can respond by helping to meet the needs of the child or young person in effective ways. Behaviour usually reflects a range of needs. Many strategies may be required to respond to children with concerning or harmful behaviours. It is also important to address the needs of the people who have an impact on the lives of children or young people e.g. family, carers, teachers and support workers.

Strategies for meeting the need could include:
- Give accurate facts and information about sexuality
- Teach social skills
- Support healthy friendships and relationships
- Teach about privacy and make home and other environments private and safe
- Make clear rules and reinforce them with praise or consequences
- Encourage communication between home, family, school, community
- Supervise during times of risk
- Monitor behaviour and involve support strategies
- Restrict access to previous victims or vulnerable others and explain why
- Limit time spent with people who bully or who also show concerning sexual behaviours
- Remove from situations where risk of harm, exploitation, abuse or neglect is suspected
- Check for infections or injuries and get medical attention
- Get family counseling or therapy
- Referral to other services

Sexual and relationships education encourages open and clear communication to provide a foundation for the development of healthy sexual behaviours and attitudes. Topics for education may include:
- Body parts
- Safety private
- Sexual activity
- Puberty
- Messages to others
- Relationships
- Safe sex
- Reproductive health
- Contraception
- Sexual abuse issues
- Marriage
- Self esteem and feelings
- Decision making

Taking action
Most sexual behaviours are normal and healthy and will be in the green category. Some light behaviours present a concern and these may be in the yellow category. Serious or dangerous sexual behaviours present the red light. They are a concern when there is risk to the child or others, the behaviour is serious. if needed

If the answer to any of the following is yes, adults have a duty of care to take action.

- The child or young person is under the age of 18
- The behaviour is of concern to others
- The behaviour provides a potential risk to the child
- The behaviour provides a potential risk to others
- The behaviour interferes with the child’s relationships
- The behaviour is life threatening

Sexual behaviours and the law
There are many different laws relating to aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviour.

- Sexual activity shall be voluntary and mutually agreed by those involved.
- The age of consent to sexual intercourse varies from 16 to 18 depending on where you live.
- A person must be able to consent to sexual activity.
- Age, intellect and psychological ability to understand and give free permission is taken into account. This includes being intoxicated by drugs or alcohol.
- Incest or sexual activity between close family members is against the law.
- Close family members could include relatives, step, foster and biological relatives.
- Taking, storing, selling, sharing or posting sexual images of a person under the age of 16 is against the law.
- Children from 10 years old can be charged for sexually abusing others.
- Their ability to understand their actions is taken into account when working out if they can be liable.

Report harm or abuse - If you are aware of, or reasonably suspect, a child has been or is being sexually abused, or is at risk of sexual abuse or is at risk of sexually abusing others, you should contact child protection services or the police.