

2018



Youth with Problematic Sexual Behaviors:  
**A RESOURCE GUIDE**  
for Professionals

## OVERVIEW

The purpose of this manual is to offer support, information, skills and additional resources for professionals as they care for youth with problematic sexual behaviors.

Sexual development begins in infancy and continues to evolve over time. Thus, sexual behaviors fueled by curiosity and exploration are a NORMAL part of childhood and adolescent development. Sexual behaviors can become problematic when the frequency, force and feelings (e.g. emotional distress) of the sexual behaviors become harmful to the youth involved.

Problematic sexual behaviors in youth are often due to a lack of skills (Silovsky, Ciesar, Ralston, & Day, 2018). Just as we send children to school to learn to read, children and adolescents need skills and information related to healthy relationships, sex and sexuality to promote safe and healthy sexual development.



*And so, as a worker you have to have a lot of tools in your tool bag, to say, try this or let me connect you with another caregiver that's been through this situation that can give you some ideas we haven't tried before. So, this is just like a day in the life, when you're working with kids who have experienced trauma.*

- Social Worker

# What's the difference?

## HOW DO WE KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROBLEMATIC AND NORMAL SEXUAL BEHAVIOR?

Normal sexual play occurs occasionally and is often driven by curiosity. The behavior might be problematic if it happens frequently or if it seems to take up much of the youth's time.

Normal sexual play often seems more “out of the blue” or unplanned. Sexual behaviors may be problematic if the youth seems to put more thought or planning into the action.

Normal sexual play also involves mutual agreement and is not forceful or threatening. When sexual behaviors are not mutual, or include force or threats, they are considered problematic. Finally, normal sexual play typically occurs between youth of similar ages, sizes and development.

Sexual behaviors that involve youth of significantly different ages, sizes or development can indicate that the sexual behavior is problematic.

It is common for caregivers of youth with problematic sexual behaviors to feel many strong emotions including shock, anger, confusion, shame, denial and sadness (Silovsky, 2009). As a result of the problematic sexual behaviors, caregivers may also feel isolated.



*Kids are going to do stuff that is both amazing and sad at the same time. And the idea that they can work through that is huge.*

- Therapist

# Myth or Fact?

**Myth:** Problematic sexual behaviors are motivated by sexual urges or sexual deviancy.

**Fact:** Problematic sexual behaviors among youth typically are NOT motivated by sexual urges or deviancy (Silovsky, 2009).

**Myth:** Problematic sexual behaviors are solely a result of childhood sexual abuse.

**Fact:** While childhood sexual abuse is a risk factor for problematic sexual behaviors, most children with problematic sexual behaviors do not have a history of childhood sexual abuse (Allen, 2017).

**Myth:** Youth with problematic sexual behaviors will continue to offend into adulthood.

**Fact:** With appropriate supervision and treatment, a vast majority of youth with problematic sexual behaviors do NOT continue to offend into adulthood (Caldwell, 2016).

## STATISTICS & COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF PSB

Approximately 1/3 of all sexual offenses against children are committed by other youth. A quarter of sexual offenses committed by youth are with family members (Silovsky et al., 2018).

Problematic sexual behaviors are also not exclusive to any one age, gender, cultural, socioeconomic status or family environment (Silovsky, 2009).

### **Risk Factors for problematic sexual behaviors:**

- History of sexual trauma
- Living in an unsafe home or community
- Exposure to sexual acts (e.g. pornography, witnessing others practicing sex acts, witnessing adults doing sexual things)
- Lack of supervision in the home (Silovsky, et al., 2018)

**GOOD NEWS:** Studies show that only a very small percentage of youth with problematic sexual behaviors act out sexually again.

# WHAT WE CAN DO

## Sexual Behavior Rules

Caregivers can teach youth the following sexual behavior rules:

- 1** It's not okay to look at other people's private parts.
- 2** It's not okay to show other people your private parts.
- 3** It's not okay to touch other people's private parts.
- 4** It is okay to touch your own private parts as long as you are in private and do not take too much time.
- 5** It's not okay to use sexual language or gestures.

(Parents, n.d.)

# Impulse Control Skills

Many youths with problematic sexual behaviors have difficulty controlling their impulses. Caregivers can help youth control their impulses by teaching them three simple steps: Stop, Think, and Act.



## STOP

It is easier to make good decisions when we STOP and think about our behaviors.



## THINK

Once we have stopped, we now have time to THINK about our options and ask some important questions. Is what I'm thinking about doing going to break a rule? Will my actions hurt someone else? What will happen if I do this?



## ACT

After thinking about all our options, we pick the best choice and DO IT!

# SUPERVISION

## LINE OF SIGHT SUPERVISION

Increased supervision is one of the most effective ways to prevent problematic sexual behaviors.

Line of sight supervision is the act of keeping youth where you can see them at all times. Line of sight supervision allows caregivers to monitor their children's behaviors with other youth as well as children's technology use.

Line of sight supervision is hard. Caregivers have many responsibilities, and households are full of activity. For this reason, we encourage caregivers to use line of sight supervision as an ongoing practice in an attempt to keep all children safe.

## KEEPING AN EYE ON TECHNOLOGY

Advances in technology have made accessing sexually explicit material increasingly easy. Increased supervision includes monitoring the sites children may be accessing through their devices. Devices with internet access such as cell phones, tablets, computers and gaming consoles should be closely monitored. Conversations about basic internet safety (password strength, identity protection and privacy settings) can be great starting points for discussion about accessing or being exposed to sexually explicit material online or via sexts.

# SEXTING

Sexting includes sharing and sending sexual photos, videos or messages. It is not uncommon for youth to sext each other. However, caregivers can help youth understand the possible consequences of sexting:

- **Sexting can damage relationships.** Relationships with friends, family, coworkers or classmates can be harmed when sexual photos, videos or messages are shared.
- **Privacy is not guaranteed.** Youth cannot control who sees or shares a sexual photo, video or message after it is sent. Forwarding a sexual post can be done with a few simple clicks.
- **Sexual posts remain on the internet forever.** Even if a post appears deleted, many sites keep permanent records.

Caregivers can encourage youth to STOP and THINK before they send a sexual video or message.

## ENCOURAGE YOUTH TO ASK THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- Would I want my parents or caregivers to see this?
- Would I feel comfortable sharing this with the entire school?
- Is this how I want to remember myself? (Child Sexual Abuse Collaborative Group, NCTSN, 2010)

Caregivers can also consider using parental monitoring apps for computers and mobile devices to help promote safe internet and messaging behaviors. No app or software can replace the safety a child can experience when there is ongoing communication and support around their use of technology.

# PORNOGRAPHY

In today's environment, it is often difficult for youth to **avoid** seeing pornography, even if they are not looking for it.

## **PORNOGRAPHY IS:**

Pornography uses editing software, makeup and body enhancements to create unrealistic body images.

Pornography is full of gender-based violence and gender stereotypes.

Pornography normalizes sexual acts that many people are not comfortable performing.

## **PORNOGRAPHY IS NOT:**

Pornography is not like real life.

Pornography does not promote consent.

Pornography is not a substitution for sex education.

Youth who watch pornography may be more likely to try to copy the sexual acts they have seen. Youth may also develop unrealistic ideas of human bodies, sexuality and romantic relationships.

These misleading ideas may make youth feel increasingly lonely, shameful, secretive and depressed ("What's the Issue?," 2014).

## **WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO**



**Education:** Caregivers can provide youth with education that teaches youth about human anatomy and healthy relationships. Caregivers can help youth identify the ways in which pornography differs from real life.

**Respect in relationships:** Caregivers can help youth understand that healthy relationships and sexuality are rooted in mutual respect and consent.

# HOW TO HELP

Professionals in the field have been confused and baffled by problematic sexual behaviors, not really knowing what caused them or how to respond. Thankfully, this is changing. Knowledge about problematic sexual behaviors is growing even as we write this resource guide.

The cause and treatment of problematic sexual behaviors will continue to evolve as youth's access to sexualized material increases. Historically, children with problematic sexual behaviors were often believed to grow up to be sex offenders; we now know this is highly unlikely.

## HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- It is important to refer the youth to a provider who will work with caregivers in addition to working the youth.
- Refer youth who are struggling with these behaviors to someone who has specialized training in this area. If there is no one available with specialized training in problematic sexual behaviors refer them to a therapist who has training in a trauma focused treatment.
- Provide reassurance to caregivers that the youth is not likely to act out as an older adolescent or adult.
- Empower caregivers to share their values with their children about relationships and consent.
- Encourage caregivers and youth to spend time together.

# Resources

## Problematic Sexual Behaviors

<http://www.ncsby.org/>

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/understanding-and-coping-sexual-behavior-problems-children-information-parents-and>

<http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/sites/default/files/downloads/2017-PSB-Fact-Sheet-Caregivers-1.pdf>

<http://www.saferociety.org/foundation/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2015/03/Taking-Action-Children-Web.pdf>

## Sexual Development and Behavior

<https://www.oumedicine.com/docs/ad-pediatrics-workfiles/sexdevbehavnctsnncsby2009.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

## Safe Technology Use & Oversight

<http://www.netsmartz.org/Home>

<http://www.athinline.org/>

## Apps Caregivers Have Found Helpful

- Net Nanny
- Secure Teen
- Our Pact
- Covenant Eyes
- Life 360
- MMGuardian Parent App

## Pornography

<https://fightthenewdrug.org/overview/>

<http://www.itstimewetalked.com.au/>

<https://www.nofap.com/about/>

## Sex Education

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/parents/sex-and-sexuality>

<http://answer.rutgers.edu/>

<https://amaze.org/>

<http://www.iwannaknow.org/>

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/parents/>

## REFERENCES

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The logo for MOCOSA (Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault) features the word "MOCOSA" in a large, bold, blue, distressed font. The letters are thick and have a rough, hand-painted appearance with some white highlights and shadows, giving it a sense of strength and resilience.

Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault

3100 Broadway, Suite 400, Kansas City, MO 64111  
[www.mocsa.org](http://www.mocsa.org) • 24-Hour Crisis Line 816-531-0233