

What to do if/when you observe harmful sexual behaviours

Patricia Ryan, Ph.D., has developed a simple technique for immediately intervening when you see incidences of harmful sexual behavior

Let's explore these 4 steps a little more:



1. Stop the behavior.

- In a calm neutral manner tell the young person to stop what they are doing. For instance, “Joshua, can you pull your pants up and please come here” etc.
- If the behaviour involves another young person, stopping the behaviour involves separating them.

2. Define the behavior.

- In a calm neutral tone describe specifically what the young person is doing that is not okay. If responding to them with an anger/disgusted tone, the young person may interpret this as “I’m bad/They hate me” instead of “What I’m doing is not appropriate”, which could trigger the *Shield Against Shame*¹.
- When describing the behaviour:
 - be specific and clear using only a few words. This is a possible teaching moment. For instance, instead of saying “Stop!”, “What are you doing!?”, “Don’t do that!” or “That’s wrong”, try “John you are touching Tom’s penis” or “Jo you are touching Jackie’s vagina”.
 - separate the behaviour from the young person (externalising) to reduce chance of the young person feeling ‘demonised’ and that they are the problem/something inherently ‘wrong’ with them. For instance, instead of “you are bad”, “what’s wrong with you”, try “that behaviour is not acceptable”.

3. State the house rule or expectation about the behavior.

- State matter-of-factly with as few words as possible. Don’t lecture as young people will shut down and/or engage their *Shield Against Shame*.
- For instance, “In this house...”, “The house rule is...”, “We expect everyone in the house to...”
- If the young person starts to engage in conversation around the origins of the behaviour, remain calm. For further information refer to the ETS [Sexual abuse/harmful sexual behaviours disclosures: Do’s and Don’ts](#) factsheet.

4. Re-redirect the child (what you expect them to do) and/or enforce the consequence.

- For younger children redirect them to a more appropriate behavior.
- For young people where this is not the first time the behavior has occurred, increase supervision², consider implementing an appropriate consequence which is to be enforced consistently and matter-of-factly until further professional advice is sought.
- End the interaction on a positive note and praise the young person when they act in the way suggested.

¹ Golding, K. and Hughes, D. 2012. Shame can be a powerful emotion and to try and keep ourselves emotionally/psychological safe, as an automatic defence, we may either lie, minimise, blame others and/or get angry.

² ETS Harmful Sexual Behaviours: Support and Supervision Plan ideas factsheet.

Possible 'scripts' that you could use

Stop the behaviour - Mark, please come here (separate the children)

Define the behaviour - you were touching Luke's penis

State the house rule - in our house we don't touch other people's private parts

Redirect the behaviour - why don't you/we go and play with your soccer ball.

"Lucy, can you please come with me to the kitchen. It is not okay to touch your vagina in public. Our house rule is that you can only touch your own private parts in private. Why don't we go and get your clothes ready for school".

Other things to keep in mind when responding

- Engage separately and remain calm and non-punitively with the child who has enacted or initiated the behaviour.
- Overall remain calm/manage your triggers. Yes, you will be triggered by what you see/hear!!
- Notice any unusual emotions in either of the children during and after. Do they appear angry, agitated or upset? Make a note of this and inform others as required.
- Provide nurture to both young people. Reassure the 'victim' and provide comfort as required - prioritise the safety and emotional wellbeing of the child who has been 'victimised'.

If either young person becomes angry and blaming of the other young person, ensure that there is line-of-sight/supervision and clear messages are given about boundaries and rules, particularly attending to any bullying or potential for retribution.

After an incident

- Keep records of the behaviour including the actions themselves, the context, date, times and frequency. This should be done discreetly and not used as a way of punishing those involved.
- Report immediately – following agency policy and procedures.
- If the child is already engaged in treatment, make sure that the therapist receives information as soon as practical.
- Seek advice and expert assistance as soon as possible.
- Seek support for self as required.

What **not** to do ...

- Appear shocked / become angry.
- React in such a way that will make the child feel embarrassed or ashamed.
- Ignore the behaviour.
- Automatically assume that 'sexual abuse' has occurred – consider was it 'developmentally expected behaviour' vs 'harmful sexual behaviour'?
- Use language that labels a child as a "pervert", "perpetrator", "sex offender" etc.
- Conduct a formal interview / ask lots of questions.

How we respond as adults
to how our young people
behave can have a lasting
impact.

