

Responding to and Evaluating Sexual Behaviors: The A-B-C-D of Context

(Adapted from: Boston Area Rape Crisis Center from Prevent Child Abuse Vermont)

We cannot, as a rule, categorize specific sexual behaviors as healthy, problematic or abusive. For instance, masturbation, when done occasionally in private, is an expected behavior. However, when a child is constantly masturbating in front of others, or compulsively masturbating to the point where it hurts, we become concerned that something is wrong. When we are trying to make sense of a child's sexual behaviors it is important to pay attention to the **A-B-C-D of the context** in which the behavior occurs.

1. **Stay calm, avoid overreacting**
 - a. Most sexual behaviors in children are within the normal/expected range
2. **Don't ignore the behavior**
3. **Assess the situation**
 - a. **Affect/Emotion:**
 - i. Is this spontaneous, lighthearted play/activity?
 - ii. Does the child respond with strong feelings of guilt, aggression, fear, anxiety, etc.?
 - iii. Does the child appear numb or dissociate in relation to the sexual activity?
 - b. **Behavior:**
 - i. Has this behavior occurred before? In the same or different way? How often and in what contexts?
 - ii. What other patterns of behavior (sexual or non-sexual) have you noticed?
 - c. **Control:**
 - i. Is the interaction a mutually understood and wanted activity among peers?
 - ii. Is there an imbalance of power between the children?
 - iii. Does everyone involved understand what is happening, want to be there and feel free to leave or say no? Is any form of pressure, manipulation, coercion or force being used?
 - d. **Development:**
 - i. Does the behavior match the child's age and developmental level?
 - ii. Do we expect most children in this culture/community to act this way?
 - iii. Is the child's sexual development in balance with the rest of his/her development?
4. **Respond appropriately**
 - a. **Label the behavior**
 - i. I see/saw you...
 - ii. I heard you...

iii. Your friend told me...

b. Label your feelings

i. I feel... or That made me feel...

ii. That made your friend feel...

iii. That might be making your friend feel...

iv. Susie said she feels...

c. Ask open ended questions

i. If needed, ask open ended clarifying questions

d. Promote accountability and be specific

i. Stop pulling your friend's pants down/ Your friend asked you to stop

ii. When you and your friend_____ are playing together, I will be close by and the door will be open

iii. Remember our rule; we treat our friends with care and respect.