



# Clinical Report—The Evaluation of Sexual Behaviors in Children

## abstract

Most children will engage in sexual behaviors at some time during childhood. These behaviors may be normal but can be confusing and concerning to parents or disruptive or intrusive to others. Knowledge of age-appropriate sexual behaviors that vary with situational and environmental factors can assist the clinician in differentiating normal sexual behaviors from sexual behavior problems. Most situations that involve sexual behaviors in young children do not require child protective services intervention; for behaviors that are age-appropriate and transient, the pediatrician may provide guidance in supervision and monitoring of the behavior. If the behavior is intrusive, hurtful, and/or age-inappropriate, a more comprehensive assessment is warranted. Some children with sexual behavior problems may reside or have resided in homes characterized by inconsistent parenting, violence, abuse, or neglect and may require more immediate intervention and referrals. *Pediatrics* 2009;124:992–998

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual behaviors in children range from normal and developmentally appropriate to abusive and violent. Concerned parents often present to the pediatrician's office with questions about whether their child's sexual behavior is normal, whether the behavior indicates that the child has been sexually abused, and how to manage such behavior. Although earlier studies<sup>1,2</sup> have suggested a strong correlation between sexual abuse and sexual behavior problems in children, more recent studies<sup>3,4</sup> have broadened this perspective, recognizing a number of additional stressors, family characteristics, and environmental factors that are associated with intrusive and frequent sexual behaviors. Clinicians must first distinguish age-appropriate and normal sexual behaviors from behaviors that are developmentally inappropriate and/or abusive (sexual behavior problems). Children with sexual behavior problems require further assessment and more specialized treatment approaches.

Sexual behaviors are common in children. More than 50% of children will engage in some type of sexual behavior before their 13th birthday.<sup>5,6</sup> In 1 retrospective study of 339 child welfare and mental health professionals in which participants were asked about their own experiences before 13 years of age, 73% recalled engaging in sexual behaviors with other children, 34% recalled showing their genitals to another child, 16% recalled simulating intercourse with another child, and 5% recalled inserting an object in the vagina or rectum of another

Nancy D. Kellogg, MD, THE COMMITTEE ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### KEY WORDS

sexual behaviors in children, child sexual abuse

The guidance in this report does not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.

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