

Sexualised play

an extract from

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One of the signs of child sexual abuse is sexualised play. However, some forms of children's sexual interest are normal and healthy as children explore and learn about how their bodies work (Essa & Murray 1999; Rothbaum et al. 1997).

The distinction between unhealthy and healthy sexual play rests on its context and content (Essa & Murray 1999; Rothbaum et al. 1997). An unhealthy interest in sexual play is signalled by:

- sexualised play that is part of an overall pattern of behavioural difficulties, especially social difficulties and poor impulse control;
- anxiety, tension, guilt or shame about their sexual play or, alternatively, lack of emotionality about it;
- disproportional, preoccupied or compulsive interest in sexual play compared with other play interests;
- inability to re-direct children to other forms of play;
- furtiveness about their sexual play, in contrast with openness or lack of self-consciousness;
- eroticism in sexual play (in contrast with sensuality and curiosity) – as eroticism signals an advanced understanding or knowledge about sexual behaviour;
- purposeful self-stimulation rather than a mere attempt at self-soothing;
- approaches to unfamiliar children rather than friends as sexual play partners;
- coercion of or aggression towards partners;
- large differences in age or size of selected play partners;
- complaints from other children about the child's play;
- penetration of any bodily orifice with a foreign object;
- children's heightened knowledge of sexual matters compared with peers from a similar economic, social and cultural background.

These distinctions can allow you to judge whether children's sexualised play is natural, is itself abusive of one of the partners, or signals that the instigator might have been subjected to sexual abuse. If you are ever in doubt about a child's sexual play, contact your local child welfare agency for guidance about whether a report is warranted so that authorities can assess whether the child is safe.

References

- Essa, E.L. & Murray, C.I. (1999). Sexual play: When should you be concerned? *Childhood Education, 75* (4), 231-234.
- Rothbaum, F., Grauer, A. & Rubin, D.J. (1997). Becoming sexual: Differences between child and adult sexuality. *Young Children, 52* (6), 22-28.