

Responding to Sexual Behaviors in Children

A guide for caregivers | Ages 3–12

It can be startling — and confusing — when a child touches themselves in public, touches someone else's private parts, or uses sexual language. These behaviors are more common than many people realize, especially in children who have experienced trauma. The good news: with calm, consistent responses from the adults around them, most children move through this quickly.

This handout is for families whose child's therapist has identified sexual behaviors that need some active guidance at home. You are not alone, and you are not starting from zero — your relationship with your child is the most powerful tool you have.

Keep Calm and Stay Direct

When you see the behavior, respond the same way you would to any other behavior that isn't in keeping with your family's values — clearly and calmly, without a big reaction. Overreacting (yelling, expressing disgust, or lengthy lectures) can actually make the behavior worse, and it can add shame to an experience your child is already working through.

A simple, matter-of-fact response is enough:

- “That’s not how we treat our bodies — or each other — in our family. If you need to touch your body, that’s something you do by yourself in a private place.”

Think of it the way you’d handle nose-picking. It’s not a moral failure — it’s a behavior that belongs in private, and your family has a way of doing things.

Your Family’s Expectations Around Bodies and Privacy

One of the most helpful things you can do right now is name your family's values around bodies out loud — not as a list of rules, but as a description of how your family treats each other. Children remember expectations that feel like belonging, not just boundaries.

Some families find it helpful to write these down together and post them somewhere visible. The goal is for every member of the family — adults included — to live by the same expectations.

Here are some examples to start from:

“In our family, we keep our bodies private. Touching our own private parts is something we do alone, in a private place.”

“In our family, we keep our hands to ourselves. We don’t touch other people’s private parts.”

“In our family, we treat each other’s bodies with respect. We ask before we touch, and we stop when someone says no.”

“In our family, we talk to a trusted grown-up when something feels confusing or uncomfortable.”

Adapt these in your own words. The more these sound like your family, the more they will stick.

The nose-picking analogy has a frame of reference can help make this feel normal rather than intimidating for you:

It's not okay to touch someone else's private parts — just like it's not okay to pick someone else's nose.

*If you need to touch your own body, do it privately — just like if you need to pick your nose, you do it in private.
(Wash your hands before and after.)*

Stay Close and Present

Close supervision is one of the most important things you can do right now — it protects your child and the children around them, and it helps you respond consistently when the behavior comes up.

This doesn't mean hovering anxiously. It means being present and aware, especially in situations where the behavior has occurred before. Think of it as staying connected, not policing.

Be Thoughtful About What Your Child Is Exposed To

Children take in more than we realize from the media around them. For now, be more conservative than you think you need to be:

- Limit exposure to sexually explicit material — this includes many network TV shows, social media content, and music videos.
- Watch alongside your child when you can, so you know what they're seeing and can respond in the moment.
- If something comes up on a screen, use your family's values as your guide: "That's not how we treat each other in our family."

Respond to Both the Good and the Hard Moments

When your child follows your family's expectations — or comes to you instead of acting out — notice it out loud. Specific, warm praise is one of the most powerful things you can offer.

- "I'm so proud of you for coming to tell me."
- "You remembered how we do things in our family. That matters."

When the behavior happens in public or involves another person, give a calm, age-appropriate consequence — the same way you would for any behavior that falls outside your family's expectations. Consistent follow-through, without drama, is what teaches.

And show your child what warmth and appropriate physical affection look like — hugging, snuggling, holding hands. They need to see and feel that you still want to be close to them.

Keep Your Relationship Warm

Your child needs to know, without any doubt, that they are not weird or broken or bad. They need your unconditional love and your physical presence. Keep giving extra hugs and healthy, loving touch. Your closeness sends the message: you are safe, you belong here, and nothing has changed between us.



Continue showing physical affection the way you always have — hugs, snuggling on the couch, holding hands, a hand on the shoulder. Your child needs to feel that you still want to be near them and that your love for them is not conditional on their behavior.

Talk about the behavior only when it happens. The rest of the time, let your relationship be about connection. That connection is what heals.

A note for caregivers:

Your own calm is the most important ingredient in all of this. If you find yourself feeling frightened, angry, or overwhelmed when this behavior comes up, that is completely understandable — and it is worth talking about with your child’s therapist. How you are doing matters too.