

# Normal vs concerning sexual development in children

## Traffic Light Model

The following model can be used to help parents and carers to assess if a child is displaying normal or concerning sexual development behaviours.

**Green:** Sexual behaviours that are considered 'normal', healthy, spontaneous, curious, light-hearted, easily distracted, experimental, and that are in line with age and ability level. **Action:** opportunity to give the child or adolescent positive feedback and information.

**Yellow:** Sexual behaviours that are outside the norm in terms of persistence, frequency or disparity in age/development. **Action:** gather more information to assess the most appropriate action.

**Red:** Sexual behaviours outside the norm – behaviour that is excessive, secretive, compulsive, coercive or degrading. **Action:** requires immediate intervention and action.

When using the traffic light model it is important to remember the model is evidence based and outlines what research shows is normal and irregular sexual behaviours in children at various ages and stages of development.

## Considerations

There are various influences on children's sexual behaviour and development, including:

- Parents and family relationships
- Media - television, internet, radio, magazines, etc
- Peer relationships
- How adults treat each other
- Children's services
- School environments
- Cultural background and norms

Social overlays or judgements should be managed carefully in order to appropriately respond to the behaviours in the first instance.

When assessing a child's sexualised behaviour it is important to consider the following variables:

- Is the behaviour age appropriate or concerning?
- What is the context of the behaviour?
- What is the age difference and relationship between children?
- What is the vulnerability of the child? (age, cognitive ability, socio economic status)

## Situations of sexualised behaviour and peer sexual play which causes concern

- The children engaged in the sexual play do not have an ongoing mutual relationships.
- The children engaged in the sexual play/behaviour are of different ages or development levels.
- Any sexual play/behaviour which continues in spite of consistent and clear requests to stop.
- Sexual behaviour which occur in public or other places where the child has been told is not acceptable.
- Sexual play/behaviour which is eliciting complaints from other children or adversely affecting them.
- Sexual behaviour which progresses in frequency, intensity or intrusiveness over time.
- Sexual behaviour that is associated with fear, anxiety, deep shame or intense guilt.
- Children who manually stimulate or have oral or genital contact with an animal.
- Sexual behaviours which cause physical or emotional pain to self or others.
- Children who use sex to hurt others.
- When verbal and/or physical expressions of anger precede, follow or accompany the sexual behaviour.
- When coercion, force, bribery, manipulation or threats are associated with sexual behaviours.

0 - 5 Years	
Green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thumb-sucking, body-stroking, genital holding</li> <li>• Curious - wants to touch others' private parts, e.g. when in bath</li> <li>• Games, e.g. doctor/nurse, 'show me yours, I'll show you mine'</li> <li>• Enjoyment being nude, using slang language for toilet functions</li> </ul>
Yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preoccupation with adult sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Preoccupation with touching others' genitals</li> <li>• Use of adult sexual language</li> <li>• Peeping at others' private body parts, pulling others pants down/skirt up</li> <li>• Sexualised play with dolls</li> </ul>
Red	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simulation of foreplay/sexual behaviour in play</li> <li>• Persistent masturbation, touching or attempting to touch others' genitals</li> <li>• Sexual behaviour between children involving penetration with objects</li> <li>• Forcing other children to engage in sexual play</li> </ul>
5 - 9 Years	
Green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-touching, masturbation to self-soothe</li> <li>• Increased curiosity about other children's genitals and adult sexuality (e.g. babies, gender differences)</li> <li>• Using 'toilet words', body parts as swear words to be silly, telling dirty jokes</li> <li>• Increased sense of privacy about bodies</li> </ul>
Yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistent/recurrent questions about sexual activity</li> <li>• Writing sexually threatening notes</li> <li>• Engaging in mutual masturbation</li> <li>• Constant public touching of own genitals</li> <li>• Use of adult language to discuss sex eg., "do I look sexy?"</li> <li>• Persistent use of dirty words</li> </ul>
Red	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistent masturbation, especially in front of others</li> <li>• Sexual behaviours engaging younger/less able children (e.g. sneaking into room of sleeping younger children to touch or engage in sexual play)</li> <li>• Simulation of sexual acts sophisticated for age e.g. oral sex</li> <li>• Persistent sexual themes in talk, play, art, etc</li> </ul>
9 - 12 Years	
Green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of sexual language and dirty words/jokes with peers</li> <li>• Having girlfriends/boyfriends; consensual kissing with known peers</li> <li>• Some exhibitionism e.g. flashing/mooning to same age peers</li> <li>• Increased need for privacy</li> <li>• Occasional masturbation</li> <li>• Use of internet to chat online</li> </ul>
Yellow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sudden change in behavior or dress</li> <li>• Mixing with new and/or older people</li> <li>• Bullying involving sexual aggression</li> <li>• Pseudo maturity, inappropriate knowledge, discussion of sexuality</li> <li>• Preoccupation with online chat or pornography</li> <li>• Persistent expression of fear of pregnancy or STIs</li> <li>• Mutual masturbation, preoccupation with masturbation</li> </ul>
Red	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persistent masturbation, particularly in front of others</li> <li>• Sexual activity, oral sex, intercourse, coercion of others into sexual acts</li> <li>• Sending nude/sexually provocative images of self or others online</li> <li>• Degradation/humiliation of self or others using sexual themes</li> <li>• Presence of STI</li> <li>• Penetration of children, animals, dolls or other objects</li> </ul>

## 13 - 18 Years

### Green

- Sexually explicit conversations with peers; obscenities/jokes within norm
- Solitary masturbation
- Interest in erotica
- Use of internet to chat online
- Sexual activity: flirting, hugging, kissing, foreplay, hand-holding, consensual oral sex, intercourse with partner of similar age and development

### Yellow

- Sexual preoccupation
- Anxiety interferes with daily function
- Preoccupation with pornography, online chat, meeting online acquaintance
- Sexually aggressive themes/ obscenities/ graffiti
- Peeping, exposing, non-consensual sexual touch, violation of other's space
- Unsafe sexual behaviour i.e. unprotected, intoxicated, multiple partners

### Red

- Compulsive masturbation (especially chronic or public)
- Degradation of self/others with sexual themes
- Preoccupation with sexually aggressive pornography
- Sexual harassment, attempt/force others to expose genitals
- Sexual contact or talk with others of a significantly different age developmental status
- Sending nude or sexually provocative images of self to others online
- Genital injury to self/others
- Sexual penetration or contact with animals