

Guidelines to Follow If You Find Your Child Engaged in Sexual Behavior

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If for some reason your child displays an inappropriate sexual behavior, the following list provides some guidelines for responses. Harsh punishments and shaming will make this problem worse, not better. The ultimate goal is to help your child understand their body, have healthy ideas about sex and sexuality and improve self-control. So that starts with you having self-control too.

1. Try to remain calm and keep an even volume and tone of voice. Count to ten, take deep breaths, or use other strategies to help calm down. When you remain calm, it helps you to have better responses than when you react with strong emotions. When you remain calm, it helps your child to understand that it's the behavior you don't approve of, not the child.
2. If needed, have other children go to separate areas of the home.
3. Check your level of emotions again. If you are in control and at least somewhat calm, proceed with the steps listed below. If you continue to be very upset, find some outside source of support, such as a professional, a partner, or a friend. Continue to take deep breaths.
4. Once calm, evaluate the situation. Ask the child(ren) individually what happened. Keep the questions open ended so that they can tell you in their own words (rather than just by answering yes or no). Ask things like: What happened? Who thought of doing this? How did you learn about this?
5. Try to determine how problematic the behaviors were.
6. If your child initiated the behavior and has been taught privacy rules, remind them of the specific Private Parts Rule that they are breaking.
7. If a consequence is necessary, provide it immediately in a firm, but calm matter, such as, "Because you tried to touch Tommy's private parts, Tommy has to go home, and you can't play with him for the rest of the week."
8. After the consequence, help your child to think of things that they could have done instead of the sexual behavior, such as talking to an adult, playing with a toy, getting something to eat or drink or playing outside.
9. Let your child know that you believe in their ability for self-control. Emphasize that they can try something different next time. "Next time you think about touching Susie's private parts, you can play _____ instead, or you can come ask me for help." Give your child the words to say and practice with them.
10. Sometimes consequences are not necessary, and redirection is more helpful. For example, if the behavior is okay when done in private (such as when a child touches themselves), redirect them to their bedroom or to another nonpublic place.
11. Talk with the caregivers of any other children involved and tell them what has happened.

If the behaviors between the children are outside the limits of what is natural and healthy, other measures need to be taken.

- a. If you are in need of support, reach out to a counselor, pediatrician or school social worker and they can guide you on what to do next.
- b. I always recommend, and it is mandatory in Nebraska, that any type of sexual abuse be reported to the local child abuse hotline, even if it is between children of similar ages. Children under 10 are not usually charged in these cases but if an adult is responsible for the child's sexual behavior, then going through formal channels will allow for a higher probability that they will be arrested.
- c. It will be helpful for all of the children involved to talk to a counselor trained in problematic sexual behavior to assess their reactions, the seriousness of the behaviors and to give recommendations on treatment and rules for supervision.