



NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
ALLIANCE®

# WHAT HAPPENS NOW

## **Facing Sexual Behavior Problems With Your Child**

Discovering that your child has a problematic sexual behavior can be overwhelming. It can bring about a flood of emotions, from anger to sadness, denial, shame and guilt. Having the right help and support is vital to helping your child and assisting you in gaining a sense of hope for the future. You are not alone. Help is available.

## What happens now?

The most important thing you can do is support the safety and well-being of all your children. This includes helping your child develop healthier choices and behaviors. Effective treatments do exist and future problematic sexual behaviors can be prevented. Children with problematic sexual behaviors can learn to better respect themselves and others. Additionally, they can learn to demonstrate healthy boundaries and behaviors even when the reasons for the problematic sexual behaviors remain unclear.

### Is there anything I can do to help my child?

Your child needs your support now more than ever. It is important to remember that the sexual behavior does not completely define your child. Research shows that with targeted treatment and good parental guidance, supervision and support, most youth will not engage in further problematic sexual behavior. There are concrete steps you can take to help your child.

Most children whose families complete treatment can lead happy, successful lives, both as children and later as adults. Parental support and guidance are vital to achieving positive outcomes. If there is legal involvement, parents may decide to seek the counsel of an attorney to help them understand the legal process and their child's rights.

### Have I done something wrong? How will people see me and my child now?

It is common for caregivers to wonder why they didn't notice something earlier or wonder if they could have done something to prevent their child's problematic sexual behavior. Feelings of guilt and/or embarrassment are normal; however, it is rare that caregivers know or suspect their child is dealing with this issue. Youth often hide their sexual behavior from adults (especially parents). Parents often find out about the behavior after it occurs, and thus could not have prevented it. You can be active in preventing future behavior and promoting safety.

There is a strong stigma attached to problematic sexual behavior that can lead to severe social and academic consequences for youth. However, important adults in a child's life should understand that labeling a child is unnecessary and counterproductive. Those supervising your child can use careful communication to prompt appropriate supervision without using unhelpful labels.

# How will I keep my child and other children safe?

## Sexual Behavior Rules (for School-Age Children)

- **It is not OK** to show your private parts to others.
- **It is not OK** to look at other people's private parts.
- **It is not OK** to touch other people's private parts.
- **It is OK** to touch your private parts as long as it is in private and does not take too much time.
- **It is not OK** to use sexual language or make other people uncomfortably with your sexual behavior.

## Safety Planning

- Provide and arrange for appropriate supervision.
- Teach simple rules about boundaries and sexual behavior.
- Monitor electronic devices and access to the Internet.

Additional information is available through the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth at [www.ncsby.com](http://www.ncsby.com) or through your CAC.

**“Be aware. That’s the biggest thing.”**

—Caregiver of a child with problematic sexual behaviors



**Supervision** is key. Children who have had inappropriate sexual behaviors need line-of-sight supervision when interacting with other children. Enlisting the help of your support system can help make managing your child's behaviors more feasible. Only informed adults should be given the responsibility of babysitting or watching children when problematic sexual behaviors have occurred.

**Setting clear expectations** is an important way to help your child understand and follow rules. Children who have broken personal boundary rules should not bathe or sleep with other children or have unsupervised time with younger children. Adults in the home should also model modesty rules to help their children understand and follow basic sexual behavior rules.

## How can I support other children in my household, especially if one is a victim?

When a child acts out sexually, it can be overwhelming not only for parents and other caregivers— it can also be hard on other children in the household, most of all if one of the children was the victim. Caregivers can become torn on how to help all their children, and the stress can strain relationships and test family supports. Whether the child who acted out remains in the home or must live separately for a time, other children, especially the victim, often feel fear and sadness, and even guilt if the family must be temporarily separated. You can help other children in the household including victims with the following messages:

*“It’s not your fault.”*

*“Do you want to talk about it?” If they’re not ready to talk to you about it, ask:*

*“We are getting help for our family.”*

*“Is there someone else you trust that you can talk to?”*

*“You did the right thing by telling,” if the child victim told what happened to them.*

The child victim may experience behavior problems, nightmares, depression, or anxiety. They may startle easily, or may avoid certain places or the sibling who acted out sexually. If your child is experiencing any of these symptoms, it is recommended that your child see a therapist or other mental health professional.

## How do I talk to my child with problematic sexual behaviors about what happened?

**Don’t expect your child to understand why they engaged in the behavior.** Problematic sexual behaviors in children may be caused by curiosity and impulsivity. Children may also blame the other child, justify, or completely deny engaging in the behavior. This does not mean that your child will grow up to be a callous person. Empathy is a skill that can be gained from this experience with the appropriate guidance.

**Be ready to listen** when your child shares about the behavior and help them learn healthy responses. These behaviors typically happen within a child’s social circle. You may, very likely, have a relationship with the other child impacted by the behavior. This can be difficult to navigate. The needs of all the children should be addressed. Professionals can help the families heal.



**“Just be willing to love your child and know that they are not [defined by] their bad choices.”**

—Caregiver of a child with problematic sexual behaviors

## What are some barriers to safety my child and I might experience?

**“Even with kids who haven’t had problematic sexual behaviors, [keeping children safe] is still difficult. The internet, social media, I mean all these things that I never even dreamed of when I was a child.”**

—Caregiver of a child with problematic sexual behaviors



**Children should be protected from sexually explicit media.** Children should not have access to sexually explicit magazines or books, videos, video games, computer files, websites, songs, or television programs. In addition, children should be closely monitored while using electronic devices to ensure that inadvertent exposure is avoided. Safety measures, such as enabling parental controls on devices is a good place to start, but they should not take the place of supervision. Monitoring your child’s online interaction is just as important as monitoring their face-to-face communication.

## Where can I go to find support and help around sexual behavior problems?

Children’s Advocacy Centers (CACs) were founded to be a source of support to families and children who have experienced trauma and abuse. From the time you enter a CAC until the time you leave, you will have access to a team who works together with members of the community to provide the best support, advocacy, and therapeutic services for your family. Supporting families dealing with problematic sexual behaviors are a part of CACs’ approach either directly through onsite services or indirectly through information and referral services.

## How will treatment help my child?

Treatment for children with problematic sexual behavior has many benefits. Children frequently come away from treatment programs with an understanding that they are not alone. Families report significant improvement in communication between caregivers and children and greater skills at managing their child’s behavior. Youth also gain empathy for their victims. Treatment provides education regarding appropriate boundaries, social skills, impulse-control skills, and healthy age-appropriate sex education. Therapy is designed to address the problem behavior in a way that is trauma-informed with a goal of avoiding additional problematic behaviors, both sexual and non-sexual.

## What's my role in helping the treatment work?

Caregivers are essential in their role of implementing skills learned in treatment and translating these skills to real-life family and community settings. As the parent or caregiver, your role in treatment is paramount. You are the best person to provide support to your child. It is important to let your child know that you will stand beside them through the process of getting help. Many caregivers have a fear (or sometimes a reality) of being judged or ostracized from their family or community due to their child's problematic sexual behavior. Participation in treatment gives parents a place to be honest about their feelings and avoid the isolation that so often comes with having a child with problematic sexual behavior. Treatment for problematic sexual behavior involves both children and their caregivers.



**"I went to therapy so that my son would know I was there for him, but also to learn what he was learning so I could try it at home."**

—Caregiver of a child with problematic sexual behaviors

## Will the treatment help my child grow up to have a healthy life?

Children and youth who have received treatment for their problematic sexual behaviors are less likely to repeat the behaviors later in life. In fact, youth who participate in cognitive-behavioral therapy groups to address problematic sexual behaviors were found to have only a 2% chance of committing sex offenses in the future. In other words, they are no more likely to act out sexually than children and youth who never exhibited problematic sexual behaviors at all.

**"Several good things came out of our experience getting treatment. One of them was my child's self-esteem has come up greatly. He's more assured. He does open up and communicate with us when we encourage him when before treatment he was completely shut down. This process has actually brought out our whole family closer together. And yeah, we're still dealing with the problem. But we're moving forward and we have hope."**

—Caregiver of a child with problematic sexual behaviors



*Support for this project to recognize and address problematic sexual behaviors among children and youth comes from the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation. Special thanks to the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth and NCA's Youth with Problematic Sexual Behavior Collaborative Workgroup for their expertise and critical work creating the content upon which these documents are based.*

