Evaluation of Sexual Behaviors in Children

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Objectives

• Define normal (developmentally appropriate) sexual behavior in children
• How common are sexual behaviors in children?
• What might cause sexual behaviors
• When to be concerned
Sexual Behaviors in Children and Sexual Abuse

• Previous studies indicated a strong link between sexual behaviors in children and childhood sexual abuse
• More recent studies point to a broader range of factors
  • Family Characteristics
  • Environmental factors
  • Unique stressors
How common is it?

• More than half of all children will engage in some type of sexual behavior before 13 (Gil & Johnson, 1993)
• In one study of adults recalling childhood behaviors
  – 73% engaging in sexual behaviors in general
  – 34% showing genitals
  – 16% simulating intercourse with another child
  – 5% inserting object into vagina or rectum of another child
Normal vs. problematic: 4 levels, Children ages 2-6 (Friedrich et al, 1998)

- Level 1-Normal, common behaviors
  - Touching genitals in public/private
  - Viewing/touching peer or new sibling genitals
  - Showing genitals to peers
  - Standing too close to others
  - Trying to view peer/adult nudity
  - Behaviors are transient, few, and easily re-directed
Level 2-Less Common Behaviors (8% of children)

- Rubbing body against others
- Trying to insert tongue in mouth while kissing
- Touching peer/adult genitals
- Crude mimicking of movements associated with sex acts
- Sexual behaviors that are occasionally, but persistently, disruptive to others
- Behaviors are transient and moderately responsive to re-direction/distraction
- Assessment of situational factors is recommended (family nudity, child care, new sibling, etc)
Level 3-Uncommon behaviors (1.5% of children)

- Asking peer/adult to engage in specific sex acts
- Inserting object into genitals
- Explicitly imitating intercourse
- Touching animal genitals
- Behaviors are frequently disruptive to others, persistent, and resistant to parental distraction/re-direction
- Assessment of situational factors and family characteristics is recommended (violence, abuse, neglect)
Level 4-Rarely Normal

- Any sexual behavior between children 4 years apart or more
- Variety of sexual behaviors displayed on a daily basis
- Behaviors that result in emotional distress or physical pain
- Sexual behaviors associated with physically aggressive behavior
- Sexual behaviors that involve coercion
- Behaviors that are persistent and child becomes angry if redirected
- Assessment of situational and family factors, as well as reporting to child protection recommended
Symptoms associated with problematic sexual behavior in children (Friedrich et al, 1998)

- Internalizing
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Withdrawal
- Externalizing
  - Aggression
  - Delinquency
  - Hyperactivity
Age Factors

• Variety and frequency of sexual behaviors in young children increases up to age 5, then gradually decreases (Friedrich et al, 1998)
• May decrease due to child’s growing awareness of inappropriateness of behaviors, or negative reaction from others
Factors that Affect Frequency and Types of Sexual Behaviors (Johnson, 2007)

- Developmental level
- Child care environments (children in child care exhibit more behaviors)
- Family sexuality and attitude towards nudity
- Exposure to sexual acts or materials
- Extent of supervision
- Environmental stressors in the home (domestic violence, instability, etc)
- Parental absence
- Sexual abuse
Domestic Violence (Kellogg & Menard, 2003)

• Child sexual abuse is strongly linked to domestic violence
• Among children with a history of sexual abuse, 52% reported living with a batterer
• In cases where the abuser is an in-home male, 58% of these offenders also battered their adult female partner
• 68% of sexually abused children witness domestic violence among caregivers
Family Environment (Wasserman et al, 1996)

- Family environments of children with severe sexual behavior problems
  - Parents more likely to administer harsh punishment
  - Appear to dislike their child (criticize and blame child)
  - Be unaware of where the child is
  - Be emotionally unavailable or unsupportive
Are all Children with problematic sexual behaviors being sexually abused? (Bonner et al, 1992)

• One meta-analysis found 28% of children exhibiting sexual behavior problems had been abused, with highest prevalence among youngest children
• Other reported rates range from 38% to 48%
• Although sexually abused children display more sexual behaviors with greater frequencies (2 to 3 times that of nonabused children), there is no one specific sexual behavior that, by itself, is indicative of sexual abuse
• Sexual behaviors may not appear right after abuse
  – Latency period among 6-9 year-olds is 2.2-2.7 years
  – Latency period among 10-12 year-olds is 3-4 years
Comorbidity (Gray et al, 1999)

- One study of 127 children (9-12) with sexual behavior problems found that 96% had additional psychiatric diagnoses
  - Conduct Disorder (76%)
  - ADD or ADHD (40%)
  - Oppositional Defiant Disorder (27%)
Assessment

- Differentiate from normal sexual behaviors from ones that are more severe, and are frequent, intrusive or abusive
- Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (Available from PAR inc)
- Behaviors that the parent reports as problematic may not be problematic for the child
Assessment (Con’t)

- Developmental Considerations
  - Normal sexual behaviors typically seen in children under 6, and between two children of the same age
- Types/Frequency of sexual behaviors
  - Is the behavior normal?
  - Is it transient and responsive to parental re-direction?
- Parent response to behavior
  - Children may enjoy parent’s discomfort or be seeking attention
  - If parents re-direct with no emotional response, behaviors tend to diminish
- Situational Factors
  - New siblings, change in childcare provider or environment, nudity in the home
- Access to sexually explicit materials
  - Persistent exposure to explicit materials warrant further assessment for child abuse
References