



CPRI

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR TEAM

Promoting Safety and Sexual Health

Practical Responses : When You Find Your Adolescent Engaged in Sexual Behaviours

To say the least, it can be very upsetting and shocking to come upon your adolescent engaged in sexual behaviour. It can be even more disturbing if you discover or hear that your adolescent is involved in sexual behaviour with an inappropriate participant.

It is important to distinguish sexual behaviour problems from curiosity about healthy sexual interests and relationships of adolescents and teens. The sexual behaviour of young people can be seen within a range from typical experimentation to **problematic concerning behaviour**. Adolescence is a time of explosive growth and development at many levels. However, some types of behaviour are harmful and not appropriate.

- There would be cause for concern if there is an age difference of more than two years (chronological or development) between participants;
- adolescent is in a care taking role;
- there is a lack of consent;
- there is coercion on either person's part;
- the behaviour is excessive and seems to be a predominant interest at the exclusive of other typical teen interests.

Responding immediately to problem sexual behaviours is crucial. It is important to be aware that individual values and attitudes about sexual behaviour may result in either minimizing or over-reacting to the observed or disclosed behaviours. The initial response to the behaviour by people around the teen is important and can significantly impact on the teen's ability or willingness to address/alter the behaviours. **It is very important to hold the adolescent accountable for behaviour that is harmful and illegal by contacting police or child protection services.**

There are a number of experiences that could interfere with the expected sexual development of adolescents. These include, but are not limited to, a history of personal victimization, witness to family dysfunction and violence, mental health issue, attachment difficulties, underdeveloped social skills, and

exposure to sexualized media and a sexualized environment. In these cases consultation with a mental health professional is strongly encouraged.

When you or others observe or are told about problem sexual behaviours:

- Remain calm; don't react with shock, horror or disbelief, even though you may feel like it
- Stop/Interrupt the behaviour
- Prioritize safety and emotional well-being of the person who was allegedly harmed
- Speak with each person involved separately and in a non-punitive manner
- Be clear and firm that it is not okay to engage in problem sexual behaviour with anyone
- Focus on the behaviour, indicate your disapproval of the behaviour without being disapproving of the adolescent
- Sometimes the adolescent will be open and engage in conversations around the origins of the behaviour; Be open to listening to what they have to share, but do not investigate.
- Give clear messages about boundaries and rules

What Next?

As adults we have responsibilities:

1. To provide children and youth with supervision, guidance, and support to meet their needs,
2. To protect the youth and help them be successful,
3. To hold them accountable for harmful and illegal behaviour,
4. And to keep the community safe.

When we know that a youth has demonstrated harmful behaviour and poses a risk to themselves or others, we need to develop safety plans to address the risk of such behaviours continuing. Parents do not need to work alone at this. Seek help and supports from your family doctor or community services in order to prevent further problems and to protect all involved.

For more information about developing safety plans and maintaining a healthy sexual home environment refer to other resources on the Sexual Behaviour Team website.