

# Understanding the sex games children play

By Jeanne Viall

Little Annie tells you that she and Ashraf have been playing "mommies and daddies". Your heart sinks, your mind works overtime, and all your fears surface.

But before you react, take a deep breath and collect yourself. Children are sexual, and they play sexual games. That's normal and no cause for concern.

But there is a point at which sex games aren't normal, and you need to intervene. You also need to speak to your children about sex at an early age.

Joan Campbell is a social worker who has specialised in child sexuality. She has a masters degree in child sexuality, and her doctorate, almost complete, is on child sex offences.

In her practice, 90% of clients are children with inappropriate sexual behaviour and she has educated thousands of children and their parents about sex.

Sexual behaviour is not normal, she says, when sex games become excessive, when your child masturbates excessively, or when children abuse each other. And when teenagers are being sexual with younger children, the alarm bells should be ringing.

"Teenage sex abuse on younger children is on the increase," she says. "I work in a lot of schools doing sex education, and teachers tell me they have never had so many problems with sex games before. And research also indicates there's an increase. The question is why?"

The bigger picture is that children are exposed to more sex and sexual imagery than ever before, in many ways, sometimes through being molested themselves.

There's a greater mixing of people today. "Twenty years ago," says Campbell, "many pre-school children stayed at home." Today, children are sent to creche, often at an early age. Children from many different backgrounds come together, play together and bring together different moral values and different exposure to sexual activity in the home.

"And since 1994 there's been an influx of porn, television programmes have a more explicit sexual nature, and children are allowed to watch inappropriate programmes."

Children find their father's porn under the mattress. And in one case, children found porn among the recycling paper sent to school.

Another reason for more sex games is greater exposure to sex. In poorer families, everyone sleeps in one room and children see parents having sex. "In other families, parents aren't cautious about closing the door when they have sex. Some tell me 'our policy is not to close doors'."

There's also been an increase in sexual molestation, specifically of pre-school children.

"And so they may recreate the sex act with their friends. Often when they are molested, oral-genital contact is involved. The child is molested and it becomes a game for the next child. Quite often it does not have the dynamics of sex abuse; it's a game and they ask 'Do you want to play?'"

Sibling incest is also on the increase. Boys molest their sisters, usually after exposure to porn, she says.

Compounding all this, and the different messages children are getting, is that sex education, especially for pre-school children, is not seen as important.

"There's still a feeling that it's not necessary, it's uncalled for and will make a child promiscuous and put ideas in his or her head. But the research shows that children are less likely to be involved in sex games where there is sex education.

"And at pre-school level it must obviously be appropriate. You tell them how babies are made. It's my personal opinion, after sex educating thousands of kids, that it's better to tell pre-school children that you have sex when you want a baby, rather than people have sex when they love each other - love is too confusing a concept. A child can say, 'But I love my friend, I love my brother'."

Most important for children, says Campbell, is that they know their sexual boundaries. And this is where parents have to be clear. Children need to know what they can do from a sexual point of view. You must explain what is okay, and what is not.

"You say: It's okay to touch yourself but in private. You have to say to them: no one is allowed to put objects in your vagina (or anus), not even fingers. It is not okay for anyone to kiss your vagina or to kiss a boys' private parts."

This is easy enough for a small child to understand, and if they question why, you can say: "It's bad manners".

While sex games sometimes take place on school premises, more often it's at home.

"Parents come to me outraged that it's happened at the school. After assessing the child, I tell them that, actually, it's also happened in their home while they were having tea.

"Parents are quick to blame the school - my opinion is that the school is very seldom to blame. Most times there is adequate supervision, but children involved hide away. You can't watch every wall, every bush, every toilet. Once it comes out, and the school deals with it, it will stop. It's usually an isolated incident."

So what is appropriate?

"For three years I have been researching what's been written about normal and not normal. I have yet to come across an article which says that oral-genital games are appropriate for children," says Campbell.

What is inappropriate, then, is any oral-genital contact: children kissing genitals; inserting objects in the anus or vagina and having sexual intercourse. "It happens. I've seen children who at the age of five have sex or anal penetration."

It's also not appropriate if there is touch without consent, if there's coercion, any bribes or secrecy.

Playing "Doctor Doctor" and "I'll show you, you show me" is appropriate, as is looking and even touching. "A lot of children do touch each other; and most touch themselves when they're quite young. If they're younger than three, they're exploring. If they're older than three, they will touch themselves because it's nice.

"Self-stimulation is fine, it's normal - as long as it's not excessive and doesn't hurt," says Campbell, "and the child knows her boundaries."

Children do often know that they are not supposed to be playing these sex games and they will hide away.

What does happen is that teenagers and pre-teens don't always know what is appropriate.

"They say, 'But I just touched her vagina and she said okay'.

"Parents must give clear boundaries: if a teenager touches a child's genitals, it's sexual molestation.

"What is sad is that when a young child or teenager does sex offend, parents don't always realise the consequences for him.

"He's labelled and humiliated. He must get help.

"Often parents are so shocked and angry with the pre-teen or teen that they refuse to spend money to help him. They decide rather to give him a 'good hiding'.

"And he's too young to be reported, so a lot of children fall through the system, while you perpetuate the message that he can get away with it.

"The bottom line is to speak to children, make sure they know their own sexual boundaries, and those of others."

What to do when you find your child is playing sex games

Don't overreact

Stay neutral. Be calm, be interested.

Find out as much as you can. What do they do? Who played with whom. Speak in the third person: What do they do, what secret games do they play? Ask them how they know: Have you seen them, have they asked you to play. Once? Never? Many times? "Children love 'only once', it makes them feel it's okay," says Campbell.

Find out more about the dynamics. Were there secrets, bribes, force? Was there consent?

Find out if your child has introduced the behaviour to others. Tell the other parent.

If there is a big age difference between the children, it is extremely important that the older child gets help.

Sex educate your child.

Depending on the information you find out, what they are playing, and if you are sure a child has not been sexually molested, say: "I don't want you to play it."

Don't punish your child. Don't say you'll never play with that friend again. Don't isolate the child, don't yell at the child - all these will make a child anxious, which could trigger them to play more sex games and continue their behaviour.

The point is that sex games feel nice, they're pleasurable. And so playing the sex game can reduce anxiety.

Reinforce good behaviour. Empower the child. If you take a child's power away, they will get it somewhere else, and the sex game is a good way. It is also a way to make a new friend.

If your child can't stop playing, and you will know, seek professional help. The initiating child always thinks the other child won't tell, but it always comes out. If a child can't stop playing, it becomes a problem and he's probably doing it to compensate for his other needs. He may be seeking attention, warmth or comfort.

If it happens at school, many parents' first reaction is to take the child out of school. It's the last thing you must do. There is no guarantee the problem won't continue at the new school and you will make the child anxious. Rather go and deal with it. Go to the school. Usually these are isolated cases. Schools usually pick it up and are excellent at monitoring behaviour and referring children.

When a child is involved in oral-genital games, intervention is needed, either from parents or a professional.

There is help available, and there are many sex education services around for parents and schools. Contact Campbell for information on someone in your area at 021 788 5937.

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