

NEARI NEWS:

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

An Essential Tool for Professionals Working with those who Sexually Abuse or... A Great New Way to Stay Current with Cutting Edge Sexual Abuse Research.



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Dear Colleague,

This month we are highlighting the importance of understanding healthy sexual development in children. Unfortunately, many parents and even some professionals do not have a clear understanding of what is healthy for a particular age and what is of concern. The research article by William Friedrich and his colleagues was pivotal in beginning to define what is healthy and normal for different age groups.

Toni Cavanagh Johnson's work is also a great resource for those wanting to know how to respond to various sexual behavior in children. NEARI offers a number of her publications through the NEARI Press as well as an [online course](#) titled, "Understanding Children's Sexual Behaviors - From Natural and Healthy to Disturbed."

Understanding the Sexual Behavior of Children

by David S. Prescott, LICSW

The Issue

When health or normative sexual behavior is not understood, professionals and parents may worry that sexual behavior in a child is a sign of undetected sexual victimization. More recently, sexually aggressive behavior is sometimes viewed as a signal for perpetrating sexual violence. It is essential that professionals understand sexual behaviors in children to determine how best to respond to a child's behavior and, when appropriate, clarify what treatment is needed.

The Research

William Friedrich and his colleagues examined 1,114 children, ages 2 through 14. They demonstrated that *the frequency of observed sexual behaviors increased from the age of 2 to 5, and decreased progressively in subsequent seven years*. No behaviors were exhibited exclusively by children who have experienced sexual abuse.

The most frequent sexual behaviors involved self-stimulation, exhibitionism, and behaviors related to personal boundaries. Less frequent behaviors were those characterized as more intrusive. The authors emphasize that professionals should understand children's sexual behaviors in light of individual and family characteristics. The authors found that sexual behavior appeared to be related to:

- Child's age and development
- Maternal education and maternal attitudes about the sexual behaviors in children
- Family sexuality (e.g., a more relaxed family attitude regarding

As always, we welcome your feedback. And if you want us to examine a particular issue, please let us know.

Sincerely,
Joan Tabachnick and Steven Bengis



NEARI Press
www.neari.com

NEARI RESOURCES

**Online Course by Toni
Cavanagh Johnson, Ph.D.**

**[Understanding Children's
Sexual Behaviors - From
Natural and Healthy to
Disturbed
\(4 CEUs\)](#)**

Dr. Johnson is a licensed clinical psychologist, author, and internationally recognized researcher and trainer in the field of child sexual abuse.

Her essential online course helps people working with children understand 1) what are the expected behaviors related to sex and sexuality in young children, and 2) how to distinguish them from behaviors that are of concern and require intervention.

Here are some comments from others who have

nudity)

- Family violence and total life stress
- Hours per week in daycare

For example, parents who described their home environments as permissive reported more sexual behavior among their children than other caregivers. This was also true for children in day care centers. The authors noted that there was no significant relationship between ethnicity and sexual behaviors in children.

Implications for Professionals

Sexual behavior in children is common. It is often hard for parents to think about children as sexual beings (and for that matter many people find it hard to think of their own parents as sexual beings). However, the research shows that sexual behaviors within children are common and increasingly so through age 5. A 5-year old who tries to look at people when they are nude or undressing and/or touches their own private parts when at home is well within the normal range of behavior for both boys and girls. Understanding these behaviors is critical because parents and caregivers have an obligation to talk with children about appropriate boundaries and about feeling good about their bodies, and to help guide them towards a healthy adolescence and adulthood.

Not all sexual behaviors by children are harmful. The results of this study can help professionals provide guidance to the families of children whose sexual behaviors have raised some concerns. While coercive and intrusive sexual behaviors are unacceptable and should be addressed in some way, not every sexual behavior requires a large-scale response. Just as adults should guide all aspects of a child's development, research can help to guide adult in the appropriate responses to children.

Implications for the Field

Behavior in children is a reflection of the environment. The authors note that "the data affirms the premise that the behavior of children is reflective of the context in which they are raised." Therefore, in many instances, persistent observed behaviors may reflect interpersonal functioning and family environment more than sexual interest. Our field generally accepts the notion that any assessment or treatment must look at the development factors affecting a child's behavior. This study clearly shows that we must closely examine the environment surrounding a child to see what else may need to change.

Reference

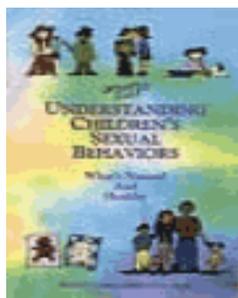
- Friedrich, W.N., Fisher, J., Broughton, D., Houston, M., & Shafran, C.R.

completed Dr. Johnson's online course, "Very good overview of natural healthy sexual behavior in children and problematic sexual behaviors in children... The information was eye opening compared to what I have believed to be true up until now about child sexuality and behaviors... Thanks for the great training."

Cost: \$45

Time: 3-4 Hours

[Click here](#) to view a sample of the course.



Featured Website

www.seicus.org

SIECUS-the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States provides education and information about sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. With nearly 50 years of experience and resources, it is an essential site for anyone working with children.

(1998). Normative sexual behavior in children: A contemporary sample. *Pediatrics*, 101.

To print a pdf of this article, click [newsletter](#).

Abstract

Objective. Sexual behavior in children can cause uncertainty in the clinician because of the relationship between sexual abuse and sexual behavior. Consequently, it is important to understand normative childhood sexual behavior.

Design. Sexual behavior in 1,114 2- to 12-year-old children was rated by primary female caregivers. These children were screened for the absence of sexual abuse. A 38-item scale assessing a broad range of sexual behavior (Child Sexual Behavior Inventory, Third Version) was administered along with the Child Behavior Checklist and a questionnaire assessing family stress, family sexuality, social maturity of the child, maternal attitudes regarding child sexuality, and hours in day care.

Results. Sexual behavior was related to the child's age, maternal education, family sexuality, family stress, family violence, and hours/week in day care. Frequencies of sexual behaviors for 2- to 5-, 6- to 9-, and 10- to 12- year-old boys and girls are presented.

Conclusions. A broad range of sexual behaviors are exhibited by children who there is no reason to believe have been sexually abused. Their relative frequency is similar to two earlier studies, and this reinforces the validity of these results.

Download the Study for Free

This article is available in its entirety from: www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/101/4/e9.

Upcoming in NEARI e-News

Next month, we will cover the issue of denial with adolescents. The study is "Denial Predicts Recidivism for Some Sexual Offenders" by Kevin Nunes et al.

About the Author:
David S. Prescott, LICSW

[David Prescott website](#)

A nationally recognized expert in the field of sexual abuse assessment, treatment, management, and prevention, Mr. Prescott has published numerous articles and authored, edited, and co-edited books on risk assessment, interviewing, and providing residential treatment to youth. He is the President of ATSA and is currently the Clinical Director at the Minnesota Sex Offender Program in Moose Lake, Minnesota.

Questions/Feedback

Please email us at info@neari.com or call us at 413.540.0712 to let us know if you have a question or a topic you would like us to cover.

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