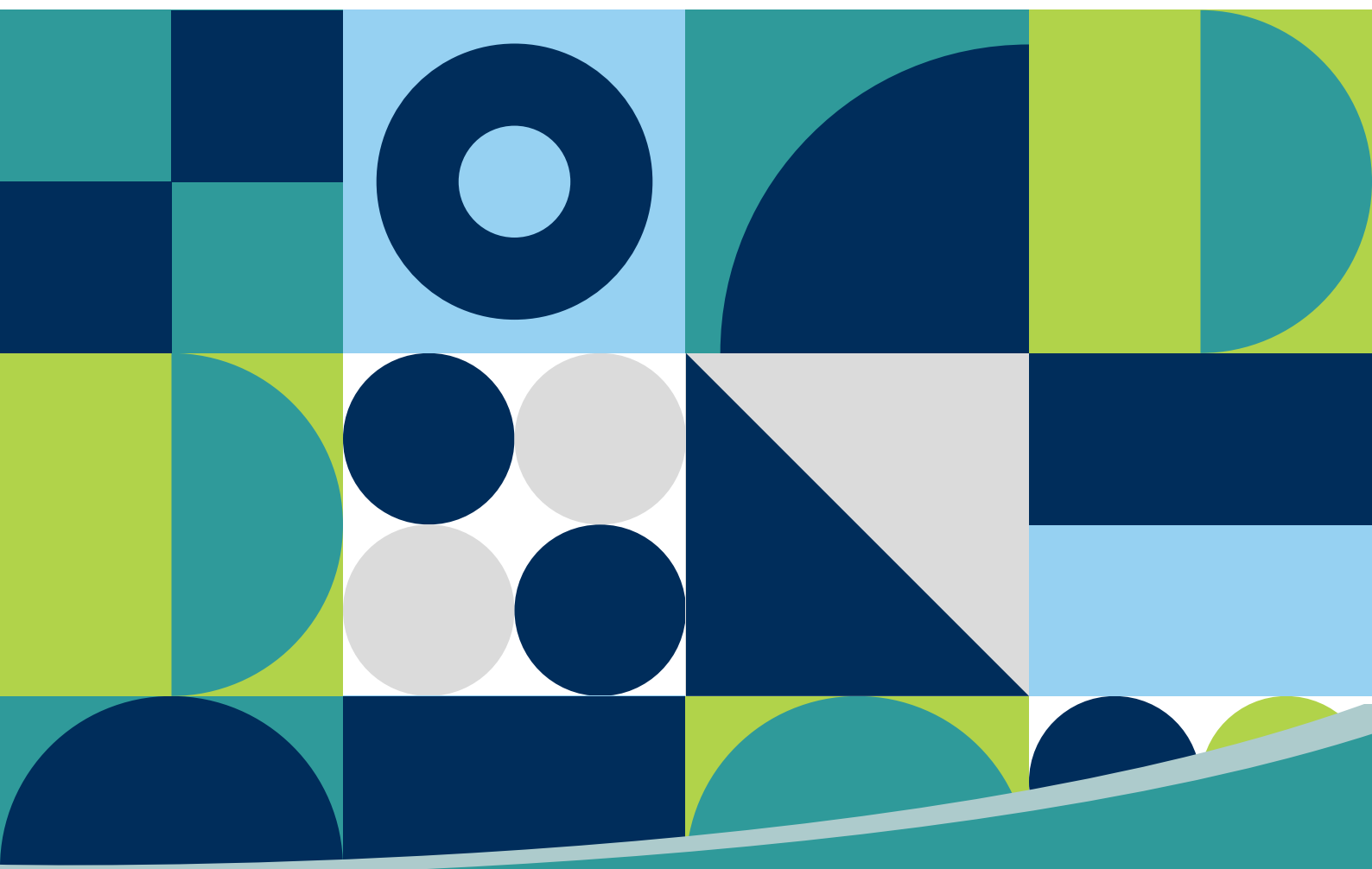


Children and young people's sexual behaviour in education and care settings

A guide for parents and carers



Government of South Australia
Department for Education



Children and young people's sexual behaviour

Children and young people are sexual beings from birth. They may show different sexual behaviour at different ages and stages of their development.

Typical and developmentally expected sexual behaviour

Most children and young people show **typical and developmentally expected sexual behaviour**¹. This means behaviour that is typical and expected for their age and stage of development. It happens between equals in age, size and developmental ability, and all those involved in the behaviour fully consent to it. The behaviour is light-hearted, curious, mutual and spontaneous. The behaviour is a natural part of child development. It's about curiosity and understanding their own and other people's bodies and relationships. The behaviour is balanced with other interests.

The developmental abilities of children and young people with disability and additional needs might be different from other children and young people the same age.

Concerning sexual behaviour

Some children and young people show **concerning sexual behaviour**². This means behaviour or knowledge that is *not* typical and expected for their age and stage of development. Often, there is inequality in age, size, developmental ability or power. It can be repeated often or intense, and adults may be worried about a risk to the health, development or safety of the child or young person, or others.

Harmful sexual behaviour

A **very small number** of children and young people display **harmful sexual behaviour**³. This type of behaviour is *not* typical and expected for the child's age and stage of development. There may be a big difference in age, developmental ability or power. Often, this behaviour is secretive or involves bribery or trickery. The behaviour can be forced on others, excessive, degrading or aggressive.

Children's safety and wellbeing in school, preschool and childcare

Educators and care workers keep children safe and support their healthy sexual, social and emotional development in many different ways.

They make sure learning and play spaces are safe, and they help children to develop skills for getting along with others. They involve parents and other professionals (including police and child protection staff when it's necessary). This also means following the right legal procedures. They support children and young people through difficult times – considering what is best for everyone, not just a single child.

^{1,2,3} Adapted from 'Traffic Lights® sexual behaviours in children and young people: a guide to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours' (v5). True Relationships and Reproductive Health, 2025, Brisbane, Queensland.

When sexual behaviour happens in schools, preschools or childcare

Children and young people need to learn that some behaviour is not okay at school, preschool or childcare.

For example, it's common for 4-year-olds to touch their genitals in public while they're still learning about privacy, but this behaviour is not okay at preschool. It's also common for teens to passionately kiss when they're in a relationship, but this behaviour is not for school.

Educators and care workers should not make children and young people feel bad for behaviour that is typical for their age and stage. They should respond by reminding children and young people about privacy and the setting's behaviour expectations. A teacher might say, 'kissing is something that people do in a private place and school is a public place'.

Sometimes typical and developmentally expected sexual behaviour might take place at the wrong time and in the wrong place. Reminders about the behaviour expectations help most children and young people learn what is okay and not okay. Your child's school, preschool or childcare will talk to you if they are worried about your child's sexual behaviour.

Concerning or harmful sexual behaviour needs a different response

This type of sexual behaviour might be against the law or classed as sexual abuse. Schools or other settings might be worried about keeping everyone safe.

Educators and care workers need to make sure that children and young people understand behaviour expectations and develop the right skills for respectful relationships.

Behaviour support plan

If your child *has shown* concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, the school, preschool or childcare might suggest a behaviour support plan. The plan helps to make sure everyone is safe and your child is supported to have their needs met.

Support and safety plan

If your child *has been affected* by the concerning or harmful sexual behaviour of another child or young person, the school, preschool or childcare might suggest a support and safety plan. The plan helps to make sure the right supports are in place for your child to be and feel safe.

Child protection and police

Sometimes specialist services are told about children's sexual behaviour so they can offer expert guidance.

Reporting to the Child Abuse Report Line

In some circumstances, by law, schools, preschools and childcare settings have to report to the Child Abuse Report Line.

This is when they *suspect sexual abuse* (even when it is by another child or young person), or if they believe a child or young person is *at risk of harm*.

The Department for Child Protection might contact you about concerns or involve another service that can help.

Reporting to police

Schools, preschools and childcare settings must report the following to police:

- *all alleged or suspected rape*, regardless of the age of the child or young person who has allegedly raped another child or young person
- all other alleged or suspected sexual offences where the child or young person alleged to have committed the offence is *10 years of age or older*.

When parents and carers are told about sexual behaviour

If your child was *directly involved in, or saw* concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you will be told as soon as possible by the school, preschool or care setting.

You may not be told straight away if specialist services believe it may interfere with the child protection or police response.

Sometimes you could find out from a social worker or the police about sexual behaviour that happened at school, preschool or childcare. You might feel angry or upset about this, but please understand that staff were following instructions from the Department for Child Protection and/or police.

If your child was *not directly involved in or saw* concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you will usually *not* be told about it.

Sometimes, there are good reasons for all parents, or groups of parents, to be told. This will usually be by letter, and you will be invited to contact a staff member if you have concerns for your child.

Privacy and confidentiality

You have the right to know what the school, preschool or care setting is doing to support your child and keep them safe. You do not have the right to any information about other children and young people.

Suspension and exclusion

Sometimes schools might suspend or exclude a child or young person – this is not a punishment. It gives the school time to put plans in place to keep everyone safe.

When police are investigating a potential criminal offence, sometimes a school cannot suspend or exclude the young person who has allegedly committed the offence. This is because they have the right to know why they are being suspended or excluded and respond, which would interfere with the police investigation.

If you're worried for your child's safety, talk to the school about your concerns.

Helping your child

If your child has shown concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, it might be upsetting to hear about what your child has done – you might feel angry, or you might not believe it. You might be worried about where they learned the behaviour.

If your child has been upset or hurt by another child's concerning or harmful sexual behaviour, you might feel angry and be concerned for their safety.

Any of these situations can be very difficult for all children and families involved.

The best way to help your child is to *stay calm*, and talk with staff at the school, preschool or care setting. Think about what services and supports could be helpful and be willing to work with others to make plans for everyone to be safe.

You could talk to a doctor, counsellor or other health professional.

Further information

More information and support about children's sexual development, sexual behaviour, consent and talking with your child about sex and relationships is available at:

Raising children parenting website
<https://www.raisingchildren.net.au>

Parenting SA
<https://www.parenting.sa.gov.au>

Talk Soon Talk Often
<https://tsto.gdhr.wa.gov.au>

Consent Can't Wait
<https://www.consent.gov.au>