

## Common Behavioral Problems Sexually Abused Children

© (1996) edited by Vicki Polin, MA, ATR, LCPC  
Reprinted from the 1997 Chicagoland Area Sexual Abuse  
Resource Guide

Children who have been sexually abused can develop special behavioral problems. Many will act out their anger and or other feelings that may seem inappropriate. While it is certainly desirable to set limits on inappropriate behaviors, it is important to keep in mind that children who have been abused have special need. Behind every behavioral problem is a reason. Talking with your child and bringing such issues up in therapy, can help to gain an understanding of why your child is behaving in certain ways. Once something is understood it will be easier to find an answer, which will lead to eliminating the problem behaviors altogether. It's important to remember that punishment is not always an effective way to eliminate problem behaviors, and some behaviors, such as bed wetting, may not respond to discipline at all.



*The Awareness Center, Inc.*

the international Jewish Coalition Against Sexual Abuse/Assault  
P.O. Box 65273, Baltimore, MD 21209  
www.theawarenesscenter.org  
443-857-5560

1. **Sexually Acting Out.** Can be defined as excessive and/or public masturbation, constant focus on sex and/or sexual behaviors, often stems from a child having been forced to perform sexual acts. Children can be confused between sexual behavior, sexuality and feelings of love and affection. Sexually abused children have not been allowed to develop their own sexuality according to their own developmental time frame. This means that the body and mind are in different place, and there may not be adequate impulse control. Special attention should be given if you notice a child who is acting sexually with another child, particularly if there is a big age difference.

- Explain the difference between public and private behaviors. For example, exploring our bodies is o.k., but it is not to be done in public. Explain that sexuality is best kept private, as it is a very special thing we do not share with everybody! Also stress the difference between private and secret. Sexuality is never a secret!
- Explain the difference between sex and love, and how we can express non-sexual love for people and reserve sex for when we are grown up. There is nothing wrong with wanting touch, like a hug or pat on the back.
- Keep in mind that sexually abused children have a tendency to sexualize things that are not usually sexual. Help your child figure out the difference!
- Also keep in mind that some sex play between similarly-aged children is normal. Consult sex play handout for clarification. In many cases, simply pointing out that it's not o.k. for children who are a lot older to have sex play with younger children is enough to deter them, otherwise consult a professional.
- Remember that you can give your kids good information about sex and sexuality and still teach them your own values. Hiding information about sex from you kids will only serve to make them more vulnerable and confused. Sex education is very important, and if you don't educate your children, someone else will!

**2. Aggressive Behavior.** Ranging from short-temperedness and low tolerance for frustration to abuse of animals and setting-fires, is very common among sexually abused children. This is a form of acting-out behavior as a way to express anger safely (see conduct disorders).

- Encourage your child to express his/her anger in other ways. Have time set aside formal "group scream" or pounding a pillow are both helpful forms of anger work.
- Teaching by Example. If you frequently lose your temper with your child and/or "rant and rave" a lot, you are sending a message that it's o.k. to take your anger out on other people. The same is true if you hit or spank your child to indicate you are displeased with their behavior. You are teaching them to solve problems by the use of violence.
- Use non-punitive behavior management techniques, such as time out for younger children and loss of privileges for older children, to eliminate specific behaviors.
- Encourage expression of feelings as a whole, validating whatever feeling your child is having. Even though you may not like what they say, your child has a right to feel whatever he/she feels (i.e. mad, sad, happy, scared, angry, . . . ). Even if we don't understand why are children may feel certain ways, it is important to send them a message that it's o.k. to feel the way they feel and to express their feelings. Having this kind of environment may prevent aggressive behavior.
- Don't set children up to fail. Giving children the opportunities to do things like set fires or smash valuables make those behaviors more likely to occur. It's important to child-proof your home!
- Severe behavior and conduct problems in adolescents, such as fire-setting and/or animal abuse, indicate professional help is needed!

**3. Anxiety Problems** can be extremely frustrating. This category includes problems at bedtime, noncompliance with lights off, terrible fears of the dark, the washroom, certain objects or places, people with certain characteristics, etc.

**For More Information Contact:**



*The Awareness Center, Inc.*

*the international Jewish Coalition Against Sexual Abuse/Assault*  
P.O. Box 65273, Baltimore, MD 21209  
[www.theawarenesscenter.org](http://www.theawarenesscenter.org)  
443-857-5560