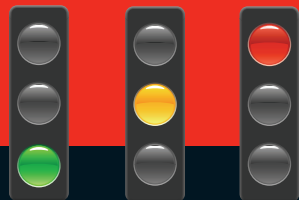


# Parents Protect!

Together we can prevent child sexual abuse



**Helping you understand**  
the sexual development  
of children under the  
age of 5



Knowing how to recognise and respond to age appropriate behaviours in children under the age of 5 helps to support the development of healthy sexual behaviour and protect children from harm or abuse

We all know that children pass through different stages of development as they grow. Each child is an individual and will develop in his or her own way. However, there is a generally accepted range of behaviours linked to a child's age and developmental stage.

This leaflet is designed to help give you, as a parent or carer, guidance and information to help you understand more about the difference between healthy and developmentally expected sexual exploration and play in children under 5, and behaviour that is not appropriate and can cause harm to others or increase a child's vulnerability.

For children in this age bracket, healthy and developmentally expected sexual exploration and play is part of an information gathering process. This is where your child is attempting to gather information about themselves and the world.

Whilst most sexual behaviour displayed by pre-school children is age-expected, some behaviours between children can be a cause for concern. The Stop it Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900 is there to offer you help and support to help you protect and support those children.

[www.parentsprotect.co.uk](http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk)

Stop it Now! Helpline  
Free and Confidential  
0808 1000 900

**stop it now!** UK & Ireland  
Together we can prevent child sexual abuse

# Identifying the behaviour of children under 5 years old

We have used a traffic light framework to help you in identifying if a behaviour is GREEN, AMBER or RED



## These are natural and expected behaviours

This doesn't mean that you would want these behaviours to continue, but they do provide an opportunity to talk, teach, explain about what is appropriate.

- Attempting to touch or curiosity about other children's genitals
- Attempting to touch or curiosity about breasts, bottoms or genitals of adults
- Role play games e.g. mummies and daddies, doctors and nurses
- Interest in body parts and what they do
- Touches/ rubs own genitals when nappy is being changed, when going to sleep, when tense, excited or afraid
- Explores differences between males and females, boys and girls
- Asks about the genitals, breasts, babies
- Has erections
- Likes to be naked
- Interested in watching people doing bathroom functions
- Interested in having / bathing a baby
- Puts something in the genitals or rectum for curiosity or exploration



## These can be of concern and have the potential to be outside safe and healthy behaviours if they persist

They require a response from a protective adult, extra support and close monitoring.

- Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told many times not to do so
- Continuous questions about genital differences after all questions have been answered
- Touches the genitals, breasts of adults not in the family and asks to be touched
- Interest in watching bathroom functions does not wane
- Puts something in genitals or rectum of self or other frequently or after being told 'no'
- Rubbing up against other children with clothes off or on
- Pulling other children's pants down/skirts up/trousers down against their will



## These are outside healthy and safe behaviours

These behaviours can signal a need for immediate protection and support from a childcare professional, e.g. health visitor, GP or social worker. As a first step the Stop it Now! helpline is one place you could go for advice and guidance. Call 0808 1000 900.

- Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities
- Plays male or female roles in an angry, sad or aggressive manner
- Expresses fear and/or disgust of own or opposite gender
- Sneakily touches adults' private parts
- Uses coercion or force in role play games with other children
- Persists in putting something in own or another child's genitals or rectum, even if painful
- Simulated or real intercourse without clothes or engages in oral sex
- Doing any of the above in secret

## Responding to observed behaviour of children under 5 years old

Below we have provided some examples of scenarios that fall under the Green, Amber and Red categories of behaviour. We have also provided some suggestions on how to respond to these behaviours. These have been provided as a guide, and it is important to remember, that even if a behaviour falls under the Green category, this doesn't mean that the behaviour should be encouraged. Each behaviour offers an opportunity to talk with children about keeping themselves and others safe and to let them know that you are someone who will listen. It is important to respond calmly.



**A 3 year old boy and a 3 year old girl are found playing in the wendy house in the garden, and are showing each other their underwear.**

### Responding to this behaviour:

- Explain that there are parts of the body that are private
- Distract them by removing them from the situation and suggesting an alternative activity



**A 4 year old boy and a 4 year old girl are found lying on the bedroom floor together, with the boy lying on top of the girl. They are clothed and the girl says they were playing 'mummies and daddies'. This is the first time either have been found to be engaging in behaviour like this.**

### Responding to this behaviour:

- Describe the unwanted behaviour clearly
- Explain to the children that this behaviour is not OK
- Distract them by removing them from the situation and suggesting an alternative activity



**A four year old boy regularly tries to coerce other children to touch his genitals whilst playing, demanding in an aggressive way that they touch his private parts. He is also frequently found rubbing his own genitals to the point at which it is painful for him.**

### Responding to this behaviour:

- Describe his behaviour clearly to him
- Point out that his behaviour is not acceptable and is impacting on others
- Prohibit the behaviour
- Call the Stop it Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900 for advice and guidance
- Consider seeking advice and support from a childcare professional, e.g. GP, health visitor or social worker

Further information on how to protect children from sexual harm and abuse is available at: [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)  
If you are ever in doubt, please seek advice and guidance from the **Stop it Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900**. For further information on sexual development, sex education and healthy

sexual behaviour, please visit Parents Protect at: [www.parentsprotect.co.uk](http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk) These materials are designed for parents, carers and other protective adults. For materials designed for use with and by professionals please see Brook: [www.brook.org.uk/index.php/traffic-lights](http://www.brook.org.uk/index.php/traffic-lights)

This Lucy Faithfull Foundation leaflet, *Helping you understand the sexual development of children aged of 5-11*, is based on the original *Traffic Lights Guide* developed by Family Planning Queensland, Australia and has been adapted with permission for use within the UK & Ireland.

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[www.fpw.com.au](http://www.fpw.com.au)

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