

WHAT CAUSES CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS TO ACT OUT SEXUALLY?

Research has shown that sexual acting out can be result of any number of combinations of family and social learning and developmental, situational, or environmental factors. In other words, children can develop sexual behavior problems for many different reasons. Physical or sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, repressive or overly permissive sexual attitudes, and home instability can all contribute to a child's use of sexual acting out as a coping response.

In addition, factors such as poor impulse control, lack of sexual information, social alienation, and low self-esteem can contribute to a child's or adolescent's choice to engage in sexual acting out. Peer pressure and alcohol abuse can sometimes contribute to abusive sexual behaviors such as date rape. Access to pornography can play a key role with younger children who are either sexually naïve or very impulsive (or both).

The quality of supervision and the presence of vulnerable people (that is, potential victims) are also important situational factors. Crowded living conditions (such as lack of private bedrooms) and exposure to explicit sexual activity or images are environmental factors that may contribute to sexual acting out. In recent years, the Internet has brought a tremendous amount of sexual information, sexual talk, and easily accessible pornography to the fingertips and eyes of millions of children and adolescents.

In the *Pathways* program, your child will learn that there is no single cause of sexual acting out. In fact, your child will learn that his or her behavior involved a personal choice. This treatment program will emphasize personal responsibility for all behavior choices. Your child will learn that there is no *cure* for sexual acting out because there is no cure for poor decision making. Successful treatment for sexual behavior problems requires that clients become responsible individuals in all aspects of their day-to-day lives.

HOW LONG DOES TREATMENT LAST?

It depends to a large extent on how long your child's sexual behavior problems have been occurring, how ingrained and compulsive the behavior is, and how intensive the treatment program is. When parents are supportive, involved in treatment, and committed to providing appropriate supervision for their child, it helps. As a general rule, 18 months is a reasonable average for weekly outpatient therapy.

You can encourage your child to take responsibility for his or her own treatment. Tell him or her how long treatment will last depends to a large extent on how hard he or she works in therapy, the quality of his or her homework assignments, the level of participation in group and

individual sessions, and his or her willingness and ability to apply what is being learned in treatment to situations in daily life.

WHAT IF MY CHILD DENIES DOING THE SEXUAL BEHAVIOR ACCUSED OF?

Don't be surprised. Most children and adolescents deny the full extent of their sexual behavior initially, *especially* when talking with their parents. The best thing you can do is listen carefully to your child's story, note any inconsistencies, and reassure your child that if his or her story changes at a later date, it is okay to tell you. *Never support your child's denial by agreeing that he or she could not have engaged in the sexual misbehavior.* Even if you have your own doubts about what happened, be neutral and open to the possibility that anything may have happened, and avoid showing support for or belief in your child's explanations and excuses.

WON'T I MAKE MY CHILD'S PROBLEM WORSE BY CONTINUING TO BRING IT UP?

No, but you can make it worse by ignoring it or avoiding it. It is true that your child may be uncomfortable talking about what he or she has done. That discomfort may later be a helpful reminder that sexual acting out or sexual offending is not worth the consequences of having to face up to one's actions. Talking about it actively and participating in a specialized treatment program are the best ways to help your child discontinue the sexual acting out. Avoid secrecy at all costs!

WHAT IF MY CHILD'S BEHAVIOR ISN'T AS BAD AS THAT OF OTHER CHILDREN OR ADOLESCENTS IN THE TREATMENT PROGRAM? WILL MY CHILD BE EXPOSED TO EVEN WORSE BEHAVIOR, OR POSSIBLY VICTIMIZED?

Good treatment programs have strict behavior during group therapy sessions, and most clients participating in outpatient treatment programs are working hard to learn new skills and get their lives under control. The programs do not allow victimizing behavior to take place during treatment and poor attitudes are strongly challenged. If you see concerning behavior inside or outside the office, discuss it with your child's treatment provider so that appropriate action can be taken.

WHEN WILL I BE ABLE TO TRUST MY CHILD AGAIN?

The safety answer – though not the one you want to hear – is probably not for a long time. This answer recognizes that *not being alone with children* is a very important *external barrier* to further offenses.

WILL MY CHILD GROW UP TO BE A SEX OFFENDER?

There is little long-term follow-up research about children and adolescents with sexual behavior problems. Research so far seems to indicate that the re-offense (recidivism) rates for juveniles

who commit sexual offenses are significantly lower than those for adults. Reoffense rates for adolescents who successfully complete treatment programs targeted on sexual behavior issues are even lower. It is also important to know that those children undergoing treatment with the full support of their parents are found to be much less likely to reoffend in the future. It is generally agreed that by providing specialized treatment programs to children and adolescents with sexual behavior problems we will likely have a safer community with fewer sexual reoffenses.

FUTURE OUTCOME

In the *Pathways* treatment program, your child will learn that there is no cure, but there is control for sexual behavior problems. By making and maintaining lifestyle changes, paying attention to warning signs, avoiding high-risk situations, and making an ongoing commitment to healthy relationships, your child can move away from any future sexual behavior problems. With attention to these issues and a strong support system, control is possible, and families can eventually return to a relatively normal life. As a parent, it is your responsibility to continue to support and monitor your child's efforts to maintain the changes made in treatment. Remember, one of the most effective ways of preventing future sexual behavior problems is to set up *external barriers* that limit your child's contact with potential victims. With treatment successfully completed and continued attention to your child's relapse prevention plan, you can know that your child's future holds the possibility of healthy and productive relationships.