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## Age and gender specific sexual behaviors in children<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The purpose of the present research was to explore the sexual behaviors of 2- to 7-year-old children through reports of day-care personnel. An overall aim of this exploratory study was to provide information about the frequencies of child sexual behaviors. Also, the aim was to explore any age and gender differences.

**Method:** A representative sample of 364 Finnish children not screened for developmental delay, sexual abuse history or psychiatric problems (181 girls and 183 boys) in 190 day-care centers were studied using the “Day-Care Sexuality Questionnaire” (DCSQ), with 244 sexual and other behavior items.

**Results:** Age influenced more the extent of the 244 sexual behaviors of boys than of girls. In sexual behaviors increasing with age, girls showed behaviors with a more social character, whereas boys showed more explorative and information-seeking behaviors. Girls had a higher frequency of domestic and gender role exploring behaviors, whereas the boys tended to engage in explorative acting and information-seeking behaviors.

**Conclusions:** The results suggest that child sexual behavior reported by day-care personnel may provide useful information about the development of children’s sexuality. Implications for sexual abuse investigations were discussed.

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*Keywords:* Sexual behavior; Children; Sexual abuse investigations; Day-care center; Sexual development

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## Introduction

Knowledge of child sexual development, including children's sexual knowledge and behavior, is limited (Hackbarth James & Burch, 1999; Volbert & van der Zanden, 1992). Playful sexual exploration during childhood is known to be common; children explore and compare both their own and other children's bodies (e.g., playing doctor) and at the same time gender-specific roles develop (e.g., playing house) (Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Trowell, 1997). Between birth and age 3, the basic gender identity of a child is shaped by both biological and environmental factors (Reinisch & Beasley, 1990; Rice Allgeier & Allgeier, 2000). According to research, 40–75% of children participate in some form of sexual exploration before the age of 13 (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Goldman & Goldman, 1988). Children preferably participate in sexual play with same-aged children (Friedrich et al., 1992; Johnson & Aoki, 1993). In a study by Reinisch and Beasley (1990) it was found that by the age of 2, children often hug, cuddle, kiss, climb on top of each other, and look at each other's genitals. By 4 or 5, children are more sexually curious. They engage more frequently in masturbation, begin sexual games with each other, and are intrigued with the toilet behaviors of others. Explorative sexual behaviors are not unusual for children from age 3 to about age 6 or 7 (Volbert & van der Zanden, 1992). A few years later, the child begins to adopt social norms and taboos regarding sexuality and sexual behaviors. The child's interest in sexuality and sexual behaviors exists contemporaneously with curiosity and interest about other things in the child's life (Johnson & Aoki, 1993). Also, there are wide variations in sexual development and interest during childhood. According to Johnson (1991, 1993), the behavioral variations of child sexual behavior can be divided into four groups: natural and healthy sexual play; sexually reactive behaviors; extensive, mutual sexual behaviors; and child perpetrating behaviors.

Knowledge regarding the sexual behaviors of children is not only of theoretical interest. Bernet (1997) stressed that it is important to be aware of the normal sexual behaviors of children for at least two additional reasons. First, normal sexual play activities between children should not be regarded as resulting from sexual abuse, and, second, sexually abused children manifest more sexual behaviors than non-clinical children do, so it is relevant to know what the baseline is. Due to the limited knowledge of usual sexual behavior patterns in children, the possibility exists that adults will either under-react and minimize problematic sexual behaviors as normal experimentation, or overreact and pathologize typical behaviors as deviant. Without frequency data about children's sexual behaviors and development, adults are likely to impose their own personal standards. Also, professionals are often expected to know whether a child's sexual behavior falls within normal bounds (Heiman, Leiblum, Cohen Esquilin, & Melendez Pallitto, 1998; Horner, Guyer, & Kalter, 1993). Also, their judgments of what constitutes age-inappropriate sexual knowledge and sexual behavior is an important criterion, used to assess suspicions of child sexual abuse (Briere & Elliott, 1997; Heiman et al., 1998). Therefore, it is important to know what is common or age appropriate child sexual behavior. For example, it has been found that behaviors involving interactive sexual play tend to be rated as more abnormal than self-directed sexual behaviors, even when the behavior is similar in nature (Heiman et al., 1998). Thus, the actual frequency of sexual behavior of children in the population can be an important guide to clinicians in diagnoses, treatments, and investigations in legal cases (Kendall-Tackett, Meyer Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Lamb & Coakley, 1993).

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