



childhood sexual behavior

Understanding, Preventing, and Responding

This is a supplemental parent-education module that is designed to help parents and caregivers of children, ages 0 to 12 years old, recognize what constitutes typical sexual behavior in children and gain knowledge and skills they can use to prevent and respond appropriately to behaviors that may be concerning or inappropriate.

For most children, curiosity and behaviors related to sex are a normal part of growing up. However, when development is disrupted, or when guidance and support are lacking, some children may engage in behaviors that are confusing, concerning, or even harmful. Problematic sexual behavior (PSB) in children is a sensitive and often misunderstood topic. Myths and misconceptions can lead to unnecessary fear; stigma; or ineffective responses from parents, caregivers, and other adults. By using early recognition, clear communication, and supportive strategies, parents can help guide children toward healthy behaviors and relationships.

Typical development across social, emotional, cognitive, and moral domains in preschool (ages 6 and under) and school-age (ages 7 to 12) children can inform children’s expected sexual knowledge and behavior. This module can help parents and caregivers understand how child development is connected to sexual behavior; recognize when a child’s behavior may need additional attention or guidance; and learn effective strategies to prevent, reduce, or stop PSB in children.

This supplemental module builds on information and strategies that are discussed in the four universal Thrive parenting programs — *Take Root, Sprout, Grow, or Branch Out* — so it is recommended that you participate in the age-appropriate universal Thrive parenting program prior to using the supplemental module.

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:



Understand how child development—social, emotional, cognitive, moral— influences sexual development, knowledge, and behavior.



Talk with your child about topics related to sexual health and development in age-appropriate, supportive ways.



Teach your child about safe touch and personal boundaries and how to speak up when your child feels uncomfortable or unsafe.



Identify protective and risk factors that can prevent or contribute to the development of PSB.



Differentiate facts from fiction related to children with PSB.



Determine how to respond with positive and effective parenting methods to prevent and decrease future PSB in your child.



Recognize the importance of parental self-care, and learn strategies to support your own well-being while supporting a child with PSB.



Locate resources to learn more about sexual development and PSB in children.

For more information about this supplemental module, visit:

<https://thrive.psu.edu/modules/supplemental>