Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people helps adults support the development of healthy sexuality and protect children and young people from harm or abuse.

**Sexual behaviour**

It is natural for children and young people to express their sexuality through their behaviour. Sexual behaviours are not just about sex; they include any talk, touch, questions, conversations and interests which relate to relationships and sexuality.

All people have the right to express their sexuality. When children or young people display sexual behaviour which increases their vulnerability or causes harm to another, adults have a responsibility to take action to provide support and protection.

Due to their experiences, children and young people who have been abused or experienced other disruptions to their development or socialisation may be at increased risk of exposure to, or of developing, unsafe or harmful sexual behaviours. Adults who care for these children and young people have a duty of care to provide relevant information and support.

**What is healthy sexual behaviour?**

Healthy sexual behaviours vary according to a child’s age and stage of development.

While it is always important to consider the context and the way in which behaviours occur, characteristics of healthy sexual behaviours across age levels include being spontaneous, curious, light-hearted, mutual, consensual and easily re-directed.

When children and young people explore and learn through play and relationships, it is considered healthy developmentally for interactions to be amongst peers close in age, size, status and ability levels.

**Birth to 4 years**

This is a time of self-exploration disinhibition, curiosity and learning. Children develop an interest in their genitals and the genitals and body parts of others. Playing games like ‘doctor/nurse’ or ‘show me yours and I’ll show you mine’ between children of a similar age are common in this age group.

**5–9 years**

Children develop an increased sense of privacy about bodies but there will still be curiosity about things such as ‘where babies come from’ or ‘why a boy has a penis
and girl has a vagina’. During this age range, children are still developing their understanding of sexuality through play. Language is also a natural way of exploring meaning and boundaries, and children may try out words for private parts including using ‘swear’ words or ‘toilet’ words. Holding their own genitals and masturbation in private are normal behaviours in this age group.

10–13 years

As puberty begins children and young people often seek more privacy. Feelings of sexual attraction coincide with puberty and relationships with peers of the opposite and/or same sex may become more significant. Expressing an interest in having a boy/girl friend is common during this age range. Exploration of relationships, language and boundaries continues to occur in the context of play and mutuality and may involve consensual kissing, games, jokes and exhibitionism for example flashing or mooning peers.

14–18 years

This is an age range where young people continue to form and explore their own identity and values. Developing relationships and having sexually explicit conversations with peers is typical. Flirting and experimenting with sexual activities ranging from holding hands and hugging to consensual oral sex and/or intercourse with a partner of similar age and developmental ability are common behaviours (age and developmental ability to consent must be taken into account).

Quick reference — Is this normal?©

RED

Sexual behaviours that are problematic or harmful, forceful, secretive, compulsive, coercive or degrading.

These behaviours signal the need to provide immediate protection and follow up support.

ORANGE

Sexual behaviours that are outside normal behaviour in terms of persistence, frequency or inequality in age, power or ability.

These behaviours signal the need to monitor and provide extra support.

GREEN

Sexual behaviours that are normal, age appropriate, spontaneous, curious, mutual, light hearted and easily diverted experimentation.

These behaviours provide opportunities to talk, explain and support.

For examples of green, orange and red behaviours from birth to 17 years, please refer to the information sheet ‘Sexual behaviours in children and young people,’ or download the Traffic Lights® app.
All behaviours require a response

All behaviours require some form of attention and response. It is the level of intervention that will vary. Green light behaviours present opportunities to provide positive feedback and information which supports healthy sexuality.

Orange and red light behaviours may require observation, documentation, education, reporting, increased supervision, therapy and/or a legal response.

All children and young people have the right to be safe

Expressing sexuality through sexual behaviour is natural and healthy, and a basic aspect of being human. Sexual behaviour which makes children or young people vulnerable or causes harm to another requires adult intervention to provide support and protection.

Your Child Safety Officer can provide you with support and assistance about addressing sexual behaviours. Addressing sexual behaviours may also form part of a child’s case plan.

Where can I get help?

There are many resources including books, fact sheets and videos to support you to talk about relationships and sexuality with a child of young person in your care. Talk to your Child Safety Officer about what information and assistance may be relevant. Relationships and sexuality education may even be a part of a child’s case plan.

This information sheet belongs to a suite of three information sheets developed to help foster and kinship carers talk about puberty, sexuality and relationships. The three information sheets are available on the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services website at www.communities.qld.gov.au/childsafety. The other two information sheets are:

- Communicating about sexuality and relationships with children and young people
- Puberty

For further information and resources to assist in talking about relationships and sexuality with a child or young person in your care, visit True Relationships and Reproductive Health’s website at www.true.org.au