



In This Issue ...

Article:

► **Foster Children And Sexualized Behavior**
by Dr. Rick Delaney

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Foster Children And Sexualized Behavior By Rick Delaney, Ph.D.



Foster parenting a child who has been sexually abused can be extremely stressful, not only for the parents, but also for other children in the home. With a large number of previously sexually

abused children in foster care, it is likely that the foster parents will sooner or later care for an abused child.

Some foster children carry with them not only the emotional confusion related to their earlier abuse, but behaviors which might upset, startle, or endanger other foster family members.

Here's how one foster mother described her twin foster daughters' sexualized behavior:

What will happen when anyone comes to the house to visit is predictable, especially if it's one of my husband's male friends. It's big trouble. The girls, Sereeta and Shaina, are both seven, but you'd think they were women of the night. Within minutes, they will be sitting on a very surprised and flustered man's lap. The girls don't need an invitation to roll around, cuddle, and run their hands through the man's hair. All this happens in a flash before we can intervene. We've had to discourage visitors from stopping by because we're afraid they'll be molested by our kids. But, that doesn't take care of another problem: we can't let the girls be alone together. When they find a way to be together, they act sexually with each other. We understand that happened a lot in their family before they were placed into foster care.

Many foster parents aren't quite sure what to do when they encounter children or youth exhibiting sexualized behavior in

their home or out in the community. At first parents may not believe what they are seeing, and might ask themselves, "Is this child really acting sexually, or do I not understand what is happening?" They question whether the sexual behavior is normal or not, and what to do to keep the child and others safe from this behavior.

What Should Concern You?

A good deal of sexual behavior in children and teenagers may be quite normal. However, some behaviors clearly signal problems. Foster children may show outright sexual overtures such as inviting such as inviting – even demanding sexual intercourse, or more subtle behaviors such as sexual knowledge beyond their years. Often, sexual behavior is targeted toward other children in the home raising foster parents' fears that the sexualized child will "tutor" the other children about sexual behavior. The parents worry about contagion (that the sexual behavior will spread) and that other children in the home or neighborhood will become victims of sexual behavior. Foster parents must first ask "About what should I be concerned?" Here's a list of seven behaviors that should raise red flags:

- Excessive masturbation or inserting objects
- Groping and or seductive behavior toward family, friends or strangers
- Sexually explicit play with toys
- Forcing or manipulating other children into sexual behavior
- Intense obsession with others' genitals or breasts
- Precocious sexual knowledge

Continued on Page Two

*Foster Children And Sexualized Behavior***Continued from Page One**

- ▶ Sexual behavior with pets or other animals
- ▶ Sexual behavior between children with a wide age difference

Why Do Children Act This Way?

There are many reasons foster children or teens act out sexually. Some children are reacting to past sexual abuse or sexually traumatic events. Perhaps they've been invited or coerced into sexual activity with adults or children, been prostituted by their parents or others, or were so neglected and unsupervised that they were easy prey for pedophiles. These children may also have witnessed adults engaging in sexual behavior or been exposed to inappropriate activities such as pornography. The bottom line in many instances is that children showing abnormal sexual behaviors have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation.

This victimization may get linked to strong feelings of fear, anxiety or anger. Some children confuse warm feelings for someone as a signal they should act sexually. They may act out sexually when they feel lonely, tense, emotionally upset, or when they miss the perpetrator about whom they have strong feelings – both positive and negative. Some children who were unwanted, or sorely neglected by parents, may have discovered that solitary sexual behavior is a way of self-soothing, or that sexual behavior is a way of gaining attention.

However, not all sexualized behavior is abnormal or related to earlier sexual abuse or exploitation. Some children discover sexual behavior on their own and make poor decisions about their sexual activity. Extremely impulsive children, for example, may act out on a whim with no sense of what consequences might follow.

Can Anything Be Done About This? Yes!

It is important for all foster parents to recognize sexualized behavior is a common problem for foster children. It's also wise for foster parents to consider the possibility that their child might have been sexually abused, whether or not that is reported by the caseworker. Sometimes history of sexual abuse is not revealed for years. Here are some suggestions for foster parents to follow:

1. Ask the placing caseworker specific questions about the child's sexual abuse history and any subsequent sexualized behavior prior to admitting the child into your home.
2. Keep in mind that children who act out sexually may have been victims of sexual abuse and/or exploitation. Their behavior must be viewed with compassion. These youngsters can best be helped when foster parents take a firm, but calm and caring approach.
3. Establish a safe and secure home with clear, protective boundaries for everyone. This might include rules about bedrooms (each child sleeps in his/her own bed), about privacy (bathroom doors are closed and locked during use), about modesty (family members do not navigate

the house undressed or scantily clad), and about touch (physical touch of others is appropriate only when the other person approves and the touch is non-sexual).

4. Provide to your child healthy, positive, age-appropriate information about physical health, well-being, and sexual development.
5. Talk to your caseworker about respite breaks to reduce your own fatigue and stress.
6. Seek professional help for yourself and your child.
7. Learn about "defensive parenting" approaches to keep you safe from possible false allegations of sexual abuse.

Note: To learn more about sexualized behavior and other issues important to foster, kinship and adoptive parents, please visit FOSTERPARENTCOLLEGE.COM.

Rick Delaney, Ph.D., is a consultant to the Casey Family Program, Specialized Alternatives For Youth, and Lutheran Family Services. His many years of practical, direct treatment with emotionally disturbed children includes a respected practice in counseling attachment-disordered foster children and their adoptive families.

House Safety By Michael F. Quinn, M.A.

Social worker and foster family agency supervisor, Michael F. Quinn, M.A., discusses house safety and the need for compliance with state safety regulations for foster homes. In this newest Foster Parent College (FPC) course Michael shares his 25 years of experience in the field of residential foster and group home care. In FPC's most unique course, Michael takes viewers on a virtual tour of a typical foster home, pointing out room-by-room common household violations often encountered by agency inspectors. Participants will learn how to use the Home Inspection Checklist to conduct their own self-guided home inspections and identify common household hazards. Also discussed are the reasons behind the importance of conducting a self-guided home inspection, strategies for keeping the home's exterior safe for children, and vehicle safety requirements. In addition to the sample Home Inspection Checklist highlighting common foster home regulations, other handouts include information on safety regulations for pools and spas, and unusual problem situations. All handouts may be downloaded by course participants. Visit FOSTERPARENTCOLLEGE.COM for details.