

# Children who have displayed Problematic Sexualised Behaviours

## About CPS:

CPS is an independent child welfare organisation, which provides a number of different programs to service the needs of children and their families. Our programs include the Sexual Abuse Counselling and Prevention Program (SACPP), Family Services Support Program, Fathers' Support Service and Early Years Services.

Most families that are referred to CPS are firstly matched with two workers who meet with your family over a number of weeks. During this time the workers will talk with you about what your family's support needs are and come up with a plan with your family about how CPS can best support you. A care plan is made and your family will be allocated worker/s from the programs who would be the most helpful for your family.

## About the Sexual Abuse Counselling and Prevention Program (SACPP)

SACPP provides a specialist therapeutic counselling service for:

- Children and young people who have been sexually abused
- Children under the age of 10 who have engaged in problematic sexualised behaviours and
- Young people between 10 and 18 who have engaged in sexually abusive behaviours.

Our counsellors have a broad range of experience and include psychologists, social workers, family therapists and art therapists. Counselling through the SACPP program is provided at no cost to families.

## What are Problematic Sexualised Behaviours?

Children who demonstrate problematic sexualised behaviours may attempt to engage other children in sexual behaviours.

These children may be of a different age (both chronological and developmental) or size. Adults may also experience a child's problematic sexualised behaviours through inappropriate touching and sexualised comments. Problematic Sexualised Behaviours are sexual behaviours that are not expected at the child's age and stage of development.

## What is the difference between healthy and unhealthy behaviours?

Normal sexual development of children usually occurs through imitating, play and asking questions. When a child's sexual behaviour is private, consensual and not interfering with their relationships with peers and others then it is healthy.

Sexual behaviours may become problematic if they begin to interfere with the child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Problematic sexual behaviours may make carers and others feel uncomfortable and uneasy, especially when such behaviours do not appear to be age appropriate. That is, when a child's sexualised behaviours, and their knowledge of sexual matters, appears advanced for their age.

These children cannot be easily distracted from these problematic sexualised behaviours so they need to be addressed.

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## Why might children display problematic sexualised behaviours?

**It is the experience of SACPP that children who display problematic sexualised behaviours may have learnt the behaviours from a variety of sources. Some children may have witnessed something of a sexual nature – including exposure to pornography or inappropriate media – or experienced their own sexual abuse.**

Some research suggests a link between problematic sexualised behaviour in children who have witnessed family violence, or been a victim of physical abuse. Lack of physical, emotional and sexual privacy may also influence the presence of problematic sexualised behaviours in children. Other children may demonstrate problematic sexualised behaviours as a way of avoiding emotions such as fear, sadness and anger.

However a child has learnt such behaviours, they may then engage in problematic sexual play in a bid to make sense of their experiences. By accessing counselling, interventions and strategies can facilitate and promote healthy sexual development in children displaying problematic sexual behaviours.

## The impact of problematic sexualised behaviours on children who display them

**Many children who display problematic sexualised behaviours may not understand the behaviour. They may feel defensive, anxious, shameful or angry about their behaviours. It is not uncommon for children who display problematic sexualised behaviours to be ostracised by their peers, who neither understand nor like the behaviours being displayed.**

Unfortunately, children who display problematic sexualised behaviours often find it difficult to stop the behaviour on their own, and usually require therapeutic intervention to change their problematic sexualised behaviour.

## Purposes of counselling

Children who have displayed problematic sexualised behaviours often require the opportunity to explore where their behaviours have come from, feelings and triggers which may influence their problematic sexualised behaviours (including feelings they may have about themselves), and how they can change their behaviours. The length of counselling varies depending on the needs of your child.

## What happens in the program?

**The SACPP team uses a whole-of-family approach. Your participation and support of your child's counselling is vital to your child's progress. There are many different ways that counselling can look – sometimes children will be seen on their own, and at other times they will be seen with their parents or carers, or with the family as a whole.**

Usually to start with, your child will be allocated their own counsellor. Your child's counsellor will meet with you to learn more about your child and the experiences your child has had. The counsellor will initially meet with your child for about 6 to 8 sessions. The counsellor will engage your child in a broad assessment around their interests, family, friends, school, their experiences, view of the world and understanding of the impacts of their sexualised behaviours. Usually these sessions occur on a weekly basis at our office.

At the end of the assessment, the counsellor will meet with you to provide feedback and to decide with your family what happens next. If it is thought that your child would benefit from ongoing counselling, your child, the counsellor and yourself will discuss goals for counselling.

Your child's counsellor can also provide support to you and your family as well as your child. Sometimes different members of the family can have their own counsellors. If there is more than one worker from CPS involved with your family, the workers will form a care-team to support your family. Workers will meet on a regular basis to make sure they are working together in the best way to support your family. We will also regularly meet with you and your family to talk about and review the work that we are doing with you to make sure that the service is helpful for your family.