When Your Adolescent Acts Out Sexually

Curiosity surrounding sexuality is “normal” in the process of development. Beginning with exploration of the body, an infant or toddler will proceed on to questions such as “Where do baby’s come from?” in elementary school and “What is happening to me?” as puberty begins. These curiosities serve as the foundation for further exploration as the body matures, sexual feelings arise and interest in sexuality is acquired. Fortunately for most, this aspect of development matures with desires, passions and behaviors organized by principles, values and social expectations into appropriate sexual behaviors. There are some, however, whose behavior exceeds the “norm” and extends sufficiently outside the realm of social mores as to draw the attention of state, clinical or legal entities. Offensive sexual behaviors range from sexual harassment (e.g., calling attention a person’s body part.) to engaging in inappropriate and, at times, illegal sexual behaviors (e.g., exposing oneself to another). Adolescents may engage in sexual behaviors that, while socially and legally condoned (e.g., masturbation), may be considered immoral by family members. However, when sexual behaviors exceed social and legal boundaries, bringing these youth to the attention of the juvenile court, these youth are referred to as Juveniles who Offend Sexually (JwOS) or Juvenile Sexual Offenders (JSO's).

Can I Prevent Sexually Offensive Behavior?

A common question asked by concerned parents is, “Can I prevent my adolescent from engaging in sexually offensive behavior?” The answer to this is “yes,” if parents are willing to invest in their child before he or she ever begins to occupy him or herself in offensive sexual behaviors. First, develop a positive and open home environment where adolescents feel safe approaching parents with concerns and questions. Second, while remaining calm, parents should be open and honest, listening effectively before responding so they know what their child is asking. Third, family members need to understand and eventually adopt a set of principles that will guide their decision-making. Parents who teach principles that they themselves adopt, such as honesty, trust, integrity, morality, chastity, fidelity and self-mastery through expectations, rules and behavior, help their adolescent put on “armor” that will protect the child in a society that floods the airways (e.g., TV, DVD, video games, music) with sexually implicit and explicit information. Fourth, help adolescents organize these principles into a mission statement, which will serve as their personal day-to-day motto, much the same as the Boy Scout motto, “Be prepared.” Fifth, teach adolescents how to use the principles to make effective decisions when faced with difficult choices. Give them possible situations they may encounter and help them use principles to decide how to deal effectively with the scenarios. Sixth, be an adolescent’s primary source of sex education. Put aside fears about talking about sexuality aside, pick up a sexuality book and learn how to present the information to a child in an age-appropriate manner. Seventh, monitor in a positive and considerate manner the movies children watch, video games they play, activities they are involved in with peers, jokes they tell that suggest insensitivity to sexuality or people, curfews and signs of substance use or abuse. Finally, encourage children to be good family and community citizens.
When Should I Seek Help?

It is important to know what “normal” sexual behaviors are to determine if a sexual behavior is inappropriate and offensive. When in doubt, parents are encouraged to seek out assistance to better understand if the behavior their adolescent is involved in is inappropriate and how best to handle it. With the current attitude in society about sexual behavior, it is important that any sexual behavior be given immediate and appropriate attention with the purpose being to:

- understand the reason the adolescent engaged in the behavior,
- make a determination as to whether the behavior is morally or legally acceptable,
- initiate the appropriate level of intervention (home based, clinical or legal),
- strengthen the adolescent against repeating the behavior through ongoing personal interviews, monitoring activities and knowing where the adolescent is, keeping an open dialogue and developing a safety plan, and
- share the information, when appropriate, with the parents of other individuals involved so they can seek assistance for their child.

Parents are encouraged to “take their heads out of the sand” and understand and accept the seriousness of sexual behaviors. Seriousness can range from kissing tag, “playing doctor” and self-stimulation, to acting out sexually in an inappropriate manner based on age or maturity (a 7-year-old simulating acting out sexual intercourse), to subtle acts of sexual behavior imposed on others without permission (exhibitionism), to active forms of aggression such as the use of manipulation (“If you do this I will give you something or take something away?”), to coercion (“If you don’t do this I will hurt you or your dog!”) or force (using a weapon). While the previous examples demonstrate the range of sexual behavior that might be considered offensive, the following guidelines are suggested for parents to help them determine if their adolescent’s sexual behavior is out of the ordinary:

- Age Difference. The greater the difference in age, the more likely the behavior will not be regarded as exploratory.

- Aggressive Components Included in Sexual Behavior. When the sexual behavior moves out of the realm of “showing” and begins to include aggression (insertion of objects into the vagina or rectum) or coercion, the behavior must be regarded as offensive.

- Exploitive and Manipulative Behavior. When one person exploits or manipulates another to gain compliance to a sexual outcome, the behavior is regarded as offensive.

Where Do I Seek Assistance?
When sexual behavior is offensive, parents may find themselves experiencing a wide range of emotions, such as anger with the child, confusion about what to do, fear about the potential outcomes in a legal system or denial that their child could have done such a thing. While these emotions may govern initial parental action, it is important that parents seek out professional guidance to assess and make recommendations about what has occurred and what can be done.

Professionals involved in helping with juveniles who offend sexually can be located in a variety of ways. Parents can contact a family therapist, their state’s Department of Human Services, a social worker, a psychologist, a psychiatrist or members of the clergy. Many hospitals have staff that work specifically with youth and adolescents who act out sexually. Most counties have victim’s advocates, and the local police or sheriff’s department should also be able to offer assistance and guidance.

**Negotiating the Legal System**

If a child is referred to the juvenile court for sexual behavior, it is important for parents to understand their legal rights, as well as those of the adolescent. They should find an attorney who has handled these types of cases in the past.

**What is Therapy Like?**

When an adolescent is referred to the juvenile court for sexually offensive behavior, it is most likely that two clinical requirements will be imposed. The first, will be the completion of a psychosexual evaluation to help those examining the case a) determine the severity of the sexual behavior based on age, victim, location of behavior, etc., b) provide recommendations to the court and clinician who will provide therapy, and c) help determine the type of clinical setting in which the adolescent will be placed.

The second requirement is to be involved in therapy. Regardless of the placement the adolescent is assigned, there are three types of therapy. Individual therapy will be used to address personal issues relating to the sexually offensive behavior, such as denial, victim empathy or relapse prevention. It may also address other psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety and conduct disorder. Group therapy is designed for the adolescent to meet with other youth who have also offended sexually. Group therapy includes education about sexuality and social skills and often includes the use of a workbook that becomes a basis for discussion. Family therapy is aimed at helping parents and family members understand what has occurred and how to prevent other incidents by strengthening all family members. Since the adolescent will most likely return home, it helps family members work out a safety plan, set realistic and age appropriate rules and expectations, and organize a democratic, principle-based decision-making system.

**Conclusion**
It is important for parents and families to understand and discuss sexual development and behavior as children develop from early childhood through adolescence. Unfortunately, many parents neglect to discuss sexual development and behavior with their children, or if they do, it is a one-time event. Providing sexual information (which includes not only anatomy and physiology, but also addresses relationship skills and laws governing sexual behavior) is developmental and needs to be presented at different ages based on what the child, youth or adolescent needs to understand in order to be aware of their sexual development, to master sexual impulses and to be appropriate in their sexual expression.