

Inappropriate sexual behaviour

An autistic child or teenager taking their clothes off or touching their genitals in public can be humiliating, upsetting, or scary for those around them. Stopping this behaviour relies on understanding the reasons behind it, which can vary widely depending on the child's age and level of maturity and understanding. This resource lists some of the common causes of inappropriate sexual behaviour, and what you can do about each one.

Not understanding the difference between public and private

Young children often hump or rub their genital area against furniture or objects because it feels nice. This isn't sexual; it's just a physically pleasant feeling. Young children may not understand the difference between rubbing their genitals in public and scratching an itch in public, for example.

Talk to your child about their private areas. Use the correct words ('penis' or 'vagina' rather than 'willie' or other slang terms) as much as possible. If your child has a tablet or another form of AAC device, consider adding words for 'penis/vagina', 'naked', 'clothes on/clothes off', etc. so that your child can ask questions about what is allowed in new situations.

It may help to use a visual aid, like a cartoon picture of a naked person, to point out which parts are private and should be covered up so other people can't see them, and which parts are fine for everyone to see. Talking about who is allowed to see or touch children's private parts and why (caregivers so that they can help the child clean themselves, doctors so they can make sure the child isn't sick) can help to clarify the rules, and help children make their own decisions when you aren't around.

It's important to frame this as a way of following rules, being polite, being kind to others who don't want to see your private parts, etc. (whatever will make sense to your child), rather than as private parts being inherently bad or shameful. If you are using a visual aid, consider using neutral colours to differentiate private vs public parts of the body, rather than red for private parts.

Your child may also have difficulty understanding the difference between private spaces, where it's ok to be naked or touch your genitals, and public spaces where it isn't ok. For some children, learning a list of every private space (their bedroom, the bathroom at home, the bathroom at school or preschool, etc.) can be helpful; for some children having visual reminders so that they know when they are moving between private and public spaces can help. Making a game out of moving between public and private spaces can be a fun way of helping this stick in a child's memory – see how fast you can get into a private space and take your pants off, then see how fast you can put them back on and get into a public space, or similar silly activities.

Frequent reminders can be helpful for children who find these concepts complex or difficult to remember. This doesn't have to be onerous rote learning – just every so often asking if the child can tell you a place where they can take their clothes off, or point to a part of their body and asking if it's public or private, can be helpful reminders.

Sensory issues with clothing

If your child consistently takes their clothes off in public, it may be due to something about their clothes being difficult to deal with. Try keeping track of which clothes they consistently take off in public – are there some outfits that always come off quickly? Are there any clothes your child will wear without trying to take them off? If your child consistently takes off some clothes but not others, it's likely that there is some kind of sensory problem with some of their clothes. This could be uncomfortable or itchy seams, scratchy labels, an odd fabric texture, or a pattern or combination of colours that they find difficult to visually process.

Some autistic children are particularly sensitive to cold or heat – if your child seems to consistently take their clothes off in public when it's warm or hot, you may want to consider getting them some looser or thinner clothing, putting a fan or a heat pump with a cooling setting in public spaces in your home, or asking the school or preschool if they can sit by an open window or a fan.

Wanting to leave, and being unable to communicate this

If your child has difficulty communicating and being understood, they may start to respond to situations they can't handle by behaving in ways that they know will lead to the situation ending. If a child is unable to communicate in any other way that they need to leave an environment or that whatever is happening is intolerable to them, it's common for them to resort to behaving in ways that they know will get them in trouble, because that's preferable to whatever's currently happening. This is particularly common in young children who don't yet have the vocabulary or emotional awareness to say "I'm getting more and more overwhelmed and I don't think I can be here any more", but do know that every time they take all their clothes off, they are immediately removed and put somewhere else.

Look for patterns in when your child takes their clothes off or starts rubbing on furniture. If they consistently start behaving inappropriately in particular environments, or when asked to do particular activities, there may be something about that environment or activity that they know they aren't able to cope with but can't articulate. You can also try looking for signals that your child is getting upset or overwhelmed before they get to the point of needing to leave so badly that they are willing to get in trouble. (Some common signs include increased stimming or fidgeting, suddenly going still and/or quiet, trying to complete activities quickly to get them done, or staring at doors, windows, or other exits.)

Pushing boundaries

Young children push boundaries and break rules as a way of figuring out their world – they’re working out that some rules are more important than others, and that some are more flexible than others, and the only way they can work that out is by getting it wrong some of the time. Being consistent in enforcing rules about appropriate clothing/genital-related behaviour can help to reduce this. If your child knows that every time they take their clothes off or touch their genitals in public, they will be removed from the public place and put somewhere private until they’re wearing clothes again or have stopped touching their genitals or rubbing them on things, they will move on to testing other rules and boundaries.

Being proud of a new skill

If you have a young child who has just learned how to dress and undress themselves independently, they may just be showing off a new skill (without understanding that it is inappropriate to do this in public). If you think this may be what’s going on, you can try letting your child show off to you in their bedroom or another private space – see how quickly they can dress and undress, etc. – and as your child learns more skills and the excitement of being able to dress themselves fades, the drive to undress in public to show that they can should fade as well.

Wanting or needing attention

Inappropriate sexual behaviour gets immediate attention from adults. It’s common for young children who need attention or are feeling neglected or left out to misbehave in some way that they know will get an adult to interact with them, and taking clothes off or touching their genitals is one way to do this.

If your child consistently takes their clothes off or touches their genitals when you haven't paid attention to them in a while (or if this behaviour has started after the arrival of a new sibling or some other event that means your attention is mostly on someone else), try to make sure your child gets as much attention as possible when they aren't behaving inappropriately. Try to schedule plenty of one-on-one time with your child, as well as time for your child to spend with their other parent, or other adults who are closely involved in the child's life. Watch out for ways that your child is asking for attention – this could be something obvious like calling your name or pulling on your sleeve, or more subtle like starting a conversation with a toy in the hope that you'll join in. Giving your child positive attention whenever they ask for it can help to reduce the likelihood of them resorting to behaviour they know will get attention, like taking their clothes off.

Being boring about enforcing rules can help if your child is looking for attention. Try not to show that you're angry or embarrassed, just remove the child from the situation as quickly and calmly as possible. The calmer and more consistent you can be in response to your child's inappropriate behaviour, the less likely they will be to use it as a way to get attention or a big response from you.

Being bullied or manipulated by peers

Autistic children are often targets of bullying from peers, and can be very suggestible or easy to manipulate. This can lead to the autistic child or teenager being told or persuaded to take their clothes off, flash someone, touch themselves in public, etc. by their peers, and doing as they're told in an attempt to fit in. This is a humiliating experience for the autistic child, and they may be reluctant to tell you or a teacher what happened, so you may need to work with your child's teacher or teachers to keep track of their peer interactions. If the same peers seem to be around every time your child behaves inappropriately, the teacher or other school staff may need to intervene. You can also talk to your child about peer pressure and bullying – a good way to approach this can be to explain that real friends want you to be happy and safe, so if other children are constantly telling you to do things that make you feel unsafe or embarrassed, they aren't your friends. It may help to roleplay with your child, getting them to practice saying "No", "I don't want to", or "I don't think that's a good idea."

Lack of access to appropriate sexual outlets

Teenagers who have no outlet for their new sexual feelings may start to express these feelings inappropriately, by masturbating in public or around other people, making inappropriate sexual comments, or trying to touch peers or others. If your teenager has started behaving like this after hitting puberty, you may need to have a conversation with them about what to do with these new feelings.

Like many sexual behaviours, it's important not to make your teenager feel ashamed of the behaviour itself. Masturbating is normal and healthy for teenagers; they just have to learn where and when it's appropriate to do it.

Most teenagers will work out how to masturbate by themselves; however, some autistic teenagers, particularly those with intellectual or learning disabilities, may need extra help. Providing your teenager with a visual guide to how to masturbate and clean up afterwards, as well as setting rules about when and where masturbation is appropriate (in their bedroom or the bathroom with the door closed) can give them an outlet for sexual feelings and stop them needing to express these feelings around others. You may also need to make a new rule for your home that everyone knocks before entering others' bedrooms, to reinforce the idea that masturbation only happens in private spaces where others aren't allowed.

Difficulty navigating appropriate sexual behaviour

Autistic teenagers are surrounded by peers who flirt with each other, make sexual comments, hold hands, kiss, and do other romantic and/or sexual things. For teenagers who have difficulty interpreting non-verbal communication (like body language and facial expressions), this can be a minefield of misunderstandings. It's important to talk to your autistic teenager about the importance of consent – both theirs and other people's – and about what to do if their romantic advances are rejected.

If your teenager is comfortable talking about being autistic and how it affects them, it can help to encourage them to be upfront about this with their friends and peers, and to ask for help when they aren't sure. (It can also help to remind them that no teenager really knows what they're doing, and everyone will make embarrassing romantic mistakes at some point!)

Sexual abuse

Inappropriate sexual behaviour can sometimes be a sign that a child or teenager has been sexually abused. This may be something to consider if your child's inappropriate sexual behaviour has started happening suddenly, without a clear trigger (such as learning to dress and undress themselves, hitting puberty, or a big life event like starting or changing schools), and is accompanied by some or all of the following:

- Other behavioural changes such as being more withdrawn, becoming clingy, or lashing out aggressively (and these behavioural changes can't be explained by another cause like puberty)
- New fears or anxieties, often around being alone, being touched, or being in a specific place or with a specific person
- Regression, particularly around bedwetting or toilet accidents (in children who have been toilet trained for some time) and/or wanting to be treated like a baby or a younger child again
- Anxiety around using the toilet or bathing, or refusing to bathe
- Frequently involving sex or sexual topics in some way when playing with toys or peers

None of these factors definitively mean that a child is being sexually abused. If you do have concerns, however, Safe To Talk is a free, confidential helpline where you can talk through what's going on – you can contact them on 0800 044 334, text 4334, or chat to someone on their website at www.safetotalk.nz. You can also find a list of other local and national organisations that can help here:

<https://www.wellstop.org.nz/links-to-other-agencies-and-resources.html>

Where to go for help with harmful sexual behaviour

If your child or teenager's sexual behaviour has become violent, or you are concerned about them harming their siblings or peers, there is help available. The organisations listed below provide therapy and intervention services for children, adolescents, and adults whose sexual behaviour is causing harm:

<https://www.stop.org.nz/>

<https://www.wellstop.org.nz/>

<https://www.safenetwork.org.nz/>