

Military OneSource Podcast — Sexual Development

Program title: What is Typical Sexual Development?

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Hello, and welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody.

Kids are constantly learning from birth. They're trying to figure out the world. They're watching, listening, taking cues. It's a full-time job for them, trying to understand the people around them, how to relate to the other kids, exploring the boundaries, sorting it all out, what's appropriate and what's not. They're also trying to understand themselves, their bodies, the changes – and all of that includes sexual development.

We'll talk about that today and it will be a frank discussion. So, if you have little ones around, this might be an episode for the Earpods. So, with that, let's bring in our guest.

Andrew Monroe is a lead trainer at the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth, and that's part of the University of Oklahoma's health sciences center. He's an expert in the problematic sexual behavior of children.

Andrew, it's great to have you with us today.

Andrew Monroe:

Hey, Bruce. It's great to be here.

Bruce:

Excellent. Excellent. Before we begin, tell us a little bit about you and your background.

Andrew:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm originally from Alabama, where I got my bachelor's at Auburn University, then got my master's at the University of Alabama, both in social work. But since my grad research assistantship, I've worked with kids with problematic sexual behaviors, as well as kids with trauma backgrounds and just kind of had experiences developing programs, both in rural and urban areas, but mostly around kids with problematic sexual behaviors.

Bruce:

All right. So, let's get right into it. I want to talk about sexual behavior and sexual development. Can you define them and really what is the difference between the two?

Andrew:

Yeah, I think I can try my best at doing that. For us, I think that what we talk about is sexual behaviors, sexual development, and trying to figure out the differences.

For us, when we think about sexual development, the biggest thing is remembering that it is a part of child development. It's a part of them trying to figure out exactly what's going on in their world. As you put it, our kids are curious and we're trying to figure out our private parts as well, which are a part of that sexual development.

And then, when we're thinking about sexual behavior specifically, we're thinking about parts of the body that we consider private or sexual. Like when we're thinking about genitals, breasts, buttocks, things like that, and that are just normal parts of growing up, those behaviors that are part of that. And we kind of recognize that there's just some of those behaviors as parents we may not want to think about, but are typical parts of growing up.

Bruce:

OK. You mentioned behavior or behaviors. So how is sexual behavior different from, say, just sex?

Andrew:

Yeah. I think when we talked about sex and we use that term, most people are either thinking about the act of like sexual intercourse or thinking about maybe those physical characteristics, where we're thinking about like chromosomes, biological sex.

When we're talking about sexual development and sexual behavior, what we're thinking about is these are those behaviors that we're trying to navigate our world using that are dealing with our private parts.

Bruce:

OK. So, this may be a larger question, but when we look at different ages, what are the typical sexual behaviors at different ages?

Andrew:

Yeah, absolutely. I think when we think about our different ages, I kind of lump them into where we think about preschool age, kids 4 and under, to kind of that early school, age 4 to 6, and older school age, kids 6 and above, to like 12.

And when we think about preschool kids, what we're really talking about is exploring kind of our touching of private parts, trying to figure out the world. May involve things like touching their mother's breasts, not really wanting to wear clothes, preferring to be nude, maybe taking off their clothes in inopportune times as they get older to that kind

of age of 4 or 5, or really thinking about maybe asking questions like, “Where did I come from? Why is mama different than dad?”

To where we’re thinking about older young children, that 4 to 6 range, we’re really thinking about maybe purposefully touching their private parts, maybe doing things like thinking about boyfriend and girlfriend, starting to play games like house, doctor, things like that. And what we know is for kids, when we see those typical sexual behaviors, they typically become more private and more concealed as kids get older.

So, when we're thinking about kids kind of in that 7 to 12 range, we’re thinking more about those wanting more of that privacy around their private areas, wanting to play more games that involve sexual behaviors. Thinking about maybe wanting boyfriends and girlfriends, but also playing things like Truth or Dare, and maybe even being interested in seeing some of that sexual media and kind of seeking out some of that information.

Bruce:

Yeah. You mentioned the sexual media. When parents are raising their kids, they’re looking to their past, but the present generation has social media that is playing a huge, huge role that maybe parents didn’t have when they were growing up. When we look at this generation and the engagement and the information that’s available on social media. And information, we mean some of it good, some of it definitely not so good. So how is that impacting this generation with regard to sexual behaviors?

Andrew:

Yeah, I think that’s a great question. I think, to be perfectly honest, we’re still trying to figure out how that’s impacting our kids. We’re having technology, we’re having media, that’s just being dumped out every day that we’re still trying to figure out what that, how that affects our kids.

I think it’s clear that we’re seeing social media affect our kids in different ways, when we talk about depression rates, anxiety rates. But when we’re talking about sexual behaviors, we’re still trying to figure that out.

One thing you kind of talked about was the fact that we know there’s more and more media out there as a whole. And what we’re seeing is more and more kids, when they get curious, if they don’t feel comfortable about asking those questions to their caregivers, they’re reaching out to either social media or they’re reaching out to search engines and Googling those things, or using other search engines. And we don’t necessarily get the most WebMD article when we type in words like sex ed or sex or any of these kind of questions they may have.

Bruce:

Yeah. I doubt they’re seeking out WebMD for answers.

Andrew:

Yeah, exactly.

Bruce:

Yeah. This is a huge topic. And I really hope that, I mean, we're going to be having a number of topics, a number of episodes down the way that look at the sexual behaviors and development in children and youth.

I really want to take an episode and really focus on social media and the internet and how that is playing a role, and really how we're just spending every day trying to keep up with all of the changes, but we'll get to that in a future episode. But, so, a different question. When we look at sexual behavior, when does sexual behavior become problematic?

Andrew:

Yeah, I think some of it is, as we think of sexual behaviors as kind of a continuum, where we go from kind of our typical sexual behaviors that we've talked a little bit about all the way to problematic. And what we find, when those move to problematic is typically when there's some potential harm to themselves or others doing those behaviors, maybe developmentally inappropriate.

So, things that we wouldn't expect to see from a 3-year-old, that they're acting out, maybe involves different types of threats, or has some strong reactions from the children that are being impacted. Because what we know is when we think of typical sexual play, one, we know it's fairly frequent. Studies show somewhere between 50% to 80% of kids have some level of sexual play in their history. And we also realize that most of those kids either have a positive or just neutral experience for that.

So, when we think about problematic sexual behaviors, we're also thinking about if the impacted child may have some strong feelings like anxiety or fear that come from that.

Bruce:

When we talk about problematic sexual behavior, what's the difference between that and say, illegal behavior?

Andrew:

Yeah, I think that's also a great question. And the best way I can describe it is when we think about illegal sexual behaviors, all illegal sexual behaviors would be problematic sexual behaviors; however, not all problematic sexual behaviors may be illegal.

When we think about illegal sexual behaviors, it's typically coming down to age of kids that are involved, potentially consent, and some discussions around that may be very different depending on the location of listeners. But we also think about problematic sexual behaviors may involve self-behaviors where we think that kids are maybe masturbating too much or other things like that, that may not affect another individual and rise to the level of an illegal sexual behavior.

Bruce:

OK. So, to kind of go in a different direction, because we're talking about sexual behavior and sexual development, which is, if it's not problematic, it's part of a young person figuring out the world and figuring out themselves. So how can healthy sexual development be encouraged?

Andrew:

Yeah, I think for me the best analogy I've come up with, and it goes for development as a whole. And my hope for our kids and caregivers is a bowling analogy is the best way I can deal with it.

If we think about our kids and they're moving down a bowling lane, really for us, our hope is our caregivers can kind of be the bumpers to help them keep on the right path moving forward, but also helping to give them the boundaries and help them to understand what those boundaries are as they're figuring out this world.

When we're talking about sexual development, keeping appropriate supervision, but also as kids maybe are doing things that we are starting to get concerned about or that we're not sure are typical, making sure that they understand the rules around private parts, they understand the rules around boundaries and safety and give them the information that they need when they're asking those questions.

I mean, I think that's another important piece in educating our kids. When they have questions, us having those smaller talks with them as they're getting older, instead of the old saying of the talk and kind of stepping through that as they get older.

Bruce:

Yeah. Yeah. I've never heard the bowling analogy before, but I can definitely see it.

I can definitely see it. So sexual behavior that's problematic, that's a subjective term. And so, a lot of times it's going to be in the eye of the parent, or another parent who is kind of brought in because of one child affecting another child. So, if a parent, if a caregiver is seeing behaviors, when should they be concerned?

Andrew:

Typically, when we think about them being concerning is those behaviors that are at a really high frequency, maybe with kids of different ages, developmental levels or sizes, as well as behaviors. If we've seen it once, and as a caregiver, we try to correct it by helping them understand the rules, helping them understand why it's not OK and giving them the kind of rules around boundaries, but they continue to do it after that, those are some of the things that we may see that may rise to the level of concerning or problematic behaviors that we would want someone to kind of reach out to their supports around.

Bruce:

OK. So, I want to talk about some of the resources that we have for parents and for caregivers. There are four of them that we're putting in the program notes of this episode.

I want to talk about two, and ask you to talk about the other two. The first two, it's about Military OneSource. So Military OneSource, it's a website and a call center. Beyond a call center, you can engage our call center by phone, by chat. There's a lot of ways that you can engage. Kind of find a fit that works for you.

You can call Military OneSource 24/7 for help. And the contact information is in the notes. Also, Military OneSource, the website, we have an article which is entitled healthy sexual behaviors in children. And well, I'll just say the title pretty much speaks for itself. You can go and check out that link. So, Andrew, the other two things are webinars, and the first one is called understanding children's sexual knowledge and behavior from a developmental perspective. What is that webinar and what would it have to offer parents and caregivers?

Andrew:

Yeah. So, I think if you're interested in learning more, it takes a much deeper dive into thinking about development across kind of that youth's age spectrum. And it's done by Dr. Ben Siegel, who's an expert, another expert with kids and youth and problematic sexual behaviors, and does a fantastic job of just taking this and kind of breaking it down into more detail.

I did also want to plug the article that you commented about with healthy sexual behaviors in children. I've reviewed that. It's amazing information to just give you a basic understanding of sexual development. Because I think for our kids and our caregivers, these can be really scary topics. And for some of our caregivers, I think any sexual behavior may feel concerning, but this gives you a list of different behaviors that may be typical and help you to understand kind of the differences between typical and concerning. I hope that's helpful.

Bruce:

Before recording this episode, I did listen to this webinar, and I can tell parents it just really gets into a lot of great information about understanding what kids know, how they come to know it, why they come to know it. It's a really great resource. And then the other is another webinar, and it's called Family Development, Sexual Behavior in Children and Youth. So, what can families and parents and caregivers get from this webinar?

Andrew:

Yeah. This is a part of a series that was done in collaboration with the National Center for Sexual Behaviors of Youth, other teams with Department of Defense. And it gives you a broader range of different topics that may fall under this. If you have parents who

are trying to decipher some of that typical versus problematic or concerning sexual behaviors, these different webinars can go in a little bit more detail so you can maybe see some of the behaviors that you're seeing to help you understand kind of where we are in this.

Bruce:

Wonderful. Hey, Andrew, any final words from you before we wrap up?

Andrew:

Yeah. I think that I just want to recognize and give my thanks for all of our members of the military, and helping them understand and recognize like these are stressful things that they may be going through, but there's a lot of support and there's a lot of helpful information out there. So, I hope that they reach out to their supports to get any help that they need.

Bruce:

There we go. Thank you very much. Andrew Monroe, thank you so much. Andrew is a lead trainer. He's with the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth. That's part of the University of Oklahoma health sciences center. Thanks a lot for joining us today.

I want to remind you that the Military OneSource podcast is brought to you by the Defense Department. Be sure to subscribe, of course, because we're covering all aspects of military life, and, of course, you can connect with us anytime on MilitaryOneSource.mil. I'm Bruce Moody. Thanks so much for listening. Bye-bye.