



Breakaway

Guideline on children's development of sexual feelings

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Policy Summary:

Regulations 6, 11, 12, 19, 20, 33, 34, 40 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2015

AIM:

All children experience a range of feelings and anxieties as they approach and progress through the stages of puberty. During this time, it is essential for parents and carers to remain calm, positive, and supportive. Each child may display different behaviours and signs as they begin to explore and understand the changes in their bodies. It is important that they feel supported, accepted, and not judged.

Children should be reassured that puberty is a natural part of development, and that the emotional and physical changes they are experiencing are normal. These changes are largely driven by hormonal activity, including increased levels of hormones such as testosterone.

Staying safe and appropriate behaviour

Staying safe

You could use a social story to describe a situation where another person may act inappropriately towards them person and how and where they can tell someone about it, eg a parent, teacher, key worker.

Kiko and the hand the underpants Rule

We use the autism-specific version of The Underwear Rule, which gives the children on the autism spectrum guidance on how to keep them safe from abuse

Private/public

While we are talking to the children about puberty and sex, we may also need to provide some guidelines about the difference between public and private:

- who they can talk to about any concerns they have;
- which rooms are private and which are public;
- that they should only undress or masturbate in a private room (e.g. their own bedroom);
- that people should always knock on a bedroom door before entering (you will need to make sure that everyone who visits your home is aware of this rule).

Masturbation

Staff must be prepared to discuss the topic of masturbation with children in a calm, age-appropriate, and non-judgmental manner to help prevent any feelings of anxiety or confusion. It is important to reassure children that masturbation is a normal and natural part of development.

Children should be supported in understanding the importance of personal hygiene in relation to this activity. Staff will ensure that tissues, wet wipes, or an appropriate towel are made available, and will encourage the child to wash their hands afterwards. This guidance should always be delivered with sensitivity, maintaining the child's dignity and privacy at all times. Seek guidance from PBSuk when required.

Physical changes

Explaining physical development

At Breakaway, we aim to support children in understanding the physical changes that occur during puberty in a clear, respectful, and developmentally appropriate way. To aid understanding, we will use visual supports and practical approaches tailored to each child's individual needs.

Visual Tools and Techniques:

- **Photographs:** Staff may use photos of the child at different life stages (e.g. baby, toddler, school-age) to help them understand growth and when puberty typically occurs in a person's life. This visual timeline can support the concept of physical development over time.
- **Body Outlines:** We may use body outlines to label body parts and explain how each part changes during puberty. This includes discussions around natural bodily fluids such as sweat, tears, urine, semen, menstrual blood, and vaginal discharge, always using correct terminology and reinforcing a positive and respectful tone.

Promoting a Positive View of Puberty:

Children will be encouraged to feel confident and positive about the changes they are experiencing. Staff can highlight the benefits and milestones of growing up—such as gaining more independence, making personal choices (e.g. hairstyles or clothing), and, in the future, participating in adult responsibilities like voting or working—focusing on what will resonate most with the individual child.

All information will be delivered in a sensitive, inclusive, and age-appropriate manner, with support available from commissioned professionals such as PBSuk if needed.

Understanding Socially Inappropriate Behaviour in Autistic Individuals

It is important to recognise that many behaviours deemed socially inappropriate are often defined as such by non-autistic individuals. Autism can significantly affect a person's ability to interpret social norms, understand what is considered appropriate behaviour, and predict or comprehend how others may feel or react.

For an autistic individual, a behaviour that may appear rude, intrusive, or even sexually motivated to others may, in fact, have a specific and meaningful purpose for them. These actions are not always driven by intent to offend or cause discomfort, but rather by neurological differences in perception, understanding, or sensory experience.

Examples of Behaviour and Possible Interpretations:

If an autistic person consistently touches or brushes against a particular woman's breasts, it may be due to:

- A routine they have developed to assess the person's mood, as they may struggle to interpret facial expressions or body language.
- A desire for sensory feedback they experienced previously when making contact.
- An impulsive action driven by curiosity about that part of the body.
- An attraction to the reaction they receive, such as a verbal response or facial expression.

If an autistic person unexpectedly kisses someone, it might be because:

- They have seen this behaviour on television and assume others will react in the same positive way as portrayed, without understanding the social context behind the action.

Staff should approach such behaviours with empathy and an understanding of the underlying reasons. It is essential to assess intent, provide clear boundaries, and use appropriate strategies—often with the support of professionals such as PBSuk—to teach social understanding in a respectful and structured manner.

Behaviour diaries

- Completing a behaviour chart, which records what is occurring before, during and after the behaviour could help you to understand the purpose of the behaviour.
- A chart 'worries and concerns' may be completed over a couple of weeks or longer if needed. This may be difficult to do if the behaviour is particularly unpleasant for the individual or those around them but it is an important stage in understanding and trying to solve the behaviour. Please note that while it is understandable that the immediate reaction to a person's behaviours could be negative and comprise feelings of shock or alarm, a calm reaction and level tone should be maintained if at all possible.

Social stories and comic strip conversations

Using social stories or comic strip conversations can be effective tools in helping autistic individuals understand social situations. These visual and narrative strategies can support the person in processing what happened, how it made others feel, and what alternative actions might be more appropriate.

For example, if an individual greets someone in an unexpected way, a social story can explain:

"We greet people by shaking their hand, not by hugging or kissing them. This helps people feel comfortable and safe." These tools also provide a non-judgmental way to explore the individual's perspective, helping staff understand how the situation was interpreted and to gently guide learning about social expectations.

Sensory issues

Due to sensory sensitivities, a child may feel anxious or uncertain about physical affection, such as hugging or kissing, in future relationships. It is important to reassure them that in any relationship, they should only engage in physical contact that they feel comfortable with. Children should be supported to understand that setting boundaries is both acceptable and necessary, and that mutual respect is a key part of healthy relationships.