

Preventing problematic and harmful sexual behaviour

FOR CARERS

Kids in out-of-home care (OOHC) can be at greater risk of developing problematic and harmful sexual behaviours (PHSB) due to their past experiences and vulnerabilities. It's possible to reduce the risk of PHSB developing by addressing trauma and increasing preventative factors.

All kids in OOHC benefit from building skills to address trauma. These skills are protective factors that help reduce the risk of PHSB developing. You can help increase kids' protective factors by targeting the following:

- **positive behaviour supports** - kids in OOHC, especially those who have experienced trauma, frequently display challenging behaviours. All kids benefit from the implementation of clear positive behaviour support, including rules and boundaries; positive feedback; emotion regulation strategies; and predictability and consistency. These strategies can help kids feel safe and support them to heal from trauma.
- **emotional regulation** – kids who have experienced trauma often feel their emotions are overwhelming. You can support your kids to identify and manage their emotions. Start building their emotional recognition skills by noticing, naming, and responding to their emotions. You can suggest a range of emotional regulation skills including breathing; mindfulness; relaxation; bubble blowing; listening to music; movement; fidgets; and stretching. Practice these strategies when kids are calm, and support use of strategies when emotions are overwhelming.
- **choice and decision making** – Your kids may find it difficult to manage their emotions when they lose power and control. This is because they feel powerless during experiences of trauma - being in control helps them feel safe. Support kids to gain appropriate control over their lives through choice and decision making. For younger kids, this might include simple choice making such as what to eat for breakfast; what to wear; or what to watch on TV. Options should be limited to one or two things. For older kids, you can allow more complex decisions such as menu planning and a choice of household tasks. Remember you should only give choice when you can allow the decision your kids make.



- **groups and activities** - kids in OOHC can build connections, social skills and trust when they join groups and activities. Work with your kids to identify activities they are interested in. Consider their strengths; likes and dislikes; interests; age; supervision requirements; time available; and activities their friends participate in. You can link your kids into sporting, cultural, religious, volunteer, or artistic groups and activities. Be prepared to try several activities before you find something your kids really enjoy.
- **building connections** – Due to past experiences, your kids may have difficulty building trust and forming positive relationships. They may also lack social skills, making it harder for them to form and maintain friendships. Support your kids to build positive connections by providing consistency and stability; being available, open, and honest; doing what you say you will; and both considering and meeting their needs. These positive connections will help your kids to feel safe.
- **sexual education** – one of the best ways to prevent PHSB from developing is to provide appropriate and ongoing sexual education. Kids benefit when they are well informed about sex, relationships, consent, and puberty. It's important that kids are provided with sexual education by the time they reach puberty. For more information about which topics to discuss and when, see the [Better Health Channel](#).
- **therapeutic supports** – kids in OOHC are at increased risk of behavioural, emotional and mental health concerns. Therapy addresses concerns by helping kids and their carers to develop new ways of thinking and responding. Not all kids require therapeutic support, but it may be useful when kids are unable to manage their emotions; self-harm; have difficulty learning or sleeping; or their behaviours place themselves or others at risk of harm.

Next Steps

Supporting kids to heal from trauma reduces the likelihood that they will display PHSB. Work with your caseworker to identify how to build targeted protective factors for your kids.