

Parenting and Healing the Sexually Acting Out Adoptee

By Arleta James, PCC

The difficulty of living with a child that sexually acts out is immense! There is the day-to-day stress of supervising the child with sexually reactive behaviors. There is the parental guilt of knowing that your child has the potential to harm/or has already harmed another child. There is the matter of having to come to terms with the fact that your son or daughter is sexual—at ages at which this behavior is not expected. In essence, there is facing that this isn't just a stage. This is a serious problem for which the family must seek help. Certainly, there is also fear associated with seeking help. Will we be believed? [Will we be viewed as the source of the sexual behavior?](#) Will our sons and daughters be removed from our home? Religious values, relational values, ideas about wanting childhood to be an innocent time—collide! There is anger for this son or daughter causing such upheaval in the family, as well as sadness in cases in which the child experienced the horrible tragedy of sexual abuse prior to arrival in the adoptive home. This list could go on!



In addition to processing all of their own thoughts and feelings, parents must find ways to alleviate this behavior and to ensure the safety of all of their children. The purpose of this two-part post is to provide several pieces of help,

- help parents establish a “safety plan”
- help parents identify some interventions to utilize to encourage behavioral change in the sexually acting out child

Please note, this blog covers sexual behaviors that have already been deemed abnormal. Certainly, a first step with any sexual behaviors among children is to decide between what is and is not the result of “normal” sexual development. Parents and professionals can find this information at [Sexual Development and Behavior in Children, National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) or in references provided in the “Reading and Resources” to the right.

1 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

Many adoptees act "younger" than their chronological age. There is a discord between their social and emotional age and their actual numerical age. Trauma interrupts development. So, adopted sons and daughters may be "playing doctor" at ages well beyond that considered "normal." The recommendations in this article keep this fact in mind.

In The Home—Interventions for Parents

Safety and Supervision—the First Priority



On their own, most parents increase the level of supervision in their home. In essence, a safety plan—the first priority—is designed and implemented. A basic safety plan includes:

- Parents seek to know the whereabouts of the son or daughter with sexually acting out behavior. In some cases, the sexual child is limited in his freedom within the home. He or she is kept close to a parent or an older trusted sibling (often paid for this baby-sitting service.) This is not a punishment. This is a way to reduce the odds of the behavior occurring, especially when there are young—infant, toddler, pre-school age—brothers and sisters in the home. This promotes the emotional well-being of each child—typical and the sexual adoptee. The less chances there are to be sexual, the more the child will see that he or she can function in the family without engaging in sexual relations. "Time in" with mom or dad strengthens the parent-child attachment. Connected children honor the rules, values and morals of their parents.

When possible, place the responsibility for staying in the line of sight of a parent on the child. Many children will voluntarily move about the house in tow of mom or dad. This keeps the problem on the sexual child. We do want to help these kids accept responsibility for their sexual behaviors.

Or, as an example, this mom describes the supervision she provides. This family adopted several children via international adoption. Their son, Ivan, age 5, is sexual and aggressive, toward their infant daughter, Jessica.

"Adopting our infant daughter, Jessica, with an unhealthy child already in residence has been a bit challenging. I take special precautions to keep Jessica safe. We just can't trust Ivan to ever be alone with the baby, or the dog for that

2

Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

matter. When I shower, the baby comes with me. I put her in the stroller and push her into the bathroom where I know she'll be safe. Her crib is in our room, and I never leave her out of my sight. I have a child-proof door knob cover on the outside of our door as a double precaution. If she's napping he cannot get in, and I do keep an eye on him at all times. He's always needed constant monitoring, even before the baby. I've never left him unsupervised so this is really nothing new. Now that the baby is older she wants to play with him and he does seem to like her. I still keep a very close watch; there's no way I'm taking any chances.

- Parents install door alarms. It is suggested to install door alarms on all the children's bedrooms. This offsets alarm malfunction issues. This more fully ensures the safety of all of the sons and daughters. Door alarms are on at night.

However, alarms often come in handy at other times. For example, in a case in which three adopted birth siblings were involved in a sexual relationship, all three children went to their rooms for an hour—safely tucked behind their door alarms—when the mom or dad needed to balance the check book or change the oil in the car. They had plenty of toys, books, etc. in their bedrooms. We must realize that there are times parents need to accomplish the tasks associated with running a home. During these times, “line of vision supervision” is impossible. As long as there is a balance between time “in” a bedroom, and time “out” of a bedroom, containment is a viable option. Containment is the natural and logical consequence of inappropriate sexual behavior. Additionally, supervision is exhausting! Breaks are essential to maintain the placement of a sexual child in the home setting.

- Parents alter sleeping arrangements. If children must share a bedroom, then it is essential that the non-sexual child be old enough to comprehend what would be considered a sexual advance. Brothers and sisters need to understand clearly that sexual advances should be immediately reported to the parent.
- Parents limit video games, television, Internet, etc. with sexual content. If the child has both sexual and aggressive behavior, limit the content of electronic devices for both sexual content and aggressive materials.



- Parents examine privileges. Sexual children need to be involved in life. Yet, their participation may only extend to those activities in which supervision is available and adequate. This is unfortunate. Yet, with older children (school age and up), we make them aware that this type of curtailment is their choice. When they curb their sexual behavior, they will be allowed the freedom associated with the level of trust that can be

3 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

extended. We can offer these sexualized children a greater number of opportunities by scheduling periods during which parental supervision is available. That is, the sexual adoptee can have a play date when mom or dad has the time to ensure the safety of the friend. The child can be on the soccer team if the coach is willing to watch over the troubled child. Again, we balance time “in” and “out” of activities as we can.

- Parents establish “Family Sexual Policies.” This is a written list (use drawings or books with very younger children) of sexual behaviors that are considered inappropriate in the family. For example, it might include,

I understand that if I am in another person’s bedroom, I must get permission first.

I understand that if no one is home to give me permission, I am not to go into that person’s bedroom.

I understand that when visiting another person’s bedroom, the door must be open.

I understand that if someone is visiting my bedroom, the door must be open.

I understand that undressing is allowed only in my bedroom and in the bathroom with the door closed.

I understand that everyone sleeps in their own bed.

I understand that there will be no sexual play and sexual touching and that includes playing doctor, nurse, or things like that.

I understand there is to be no public masturbation.

I understand there is to be no sexual contact or sexual touching between children in this family. The only individuals who have sex together in this home are mom and dad and always with the door closed.

I understand that there is to be only one person in the bathroom at one time.

I will tell an adult if anyone sexually touches me and I will continue to tell until someone believes me.

I will obey these rules of privacy, e.g. no touching of another’s private parts, purses, notebooks, private notes, diaries, no opening another’s mail, etc.

I understand that I am responsible for obeying these rules.

I understand that I am responsible if I break these rules.

I understand these rules clearly. (Source: Dr. Wayne Deuhn, Professor of Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington.)

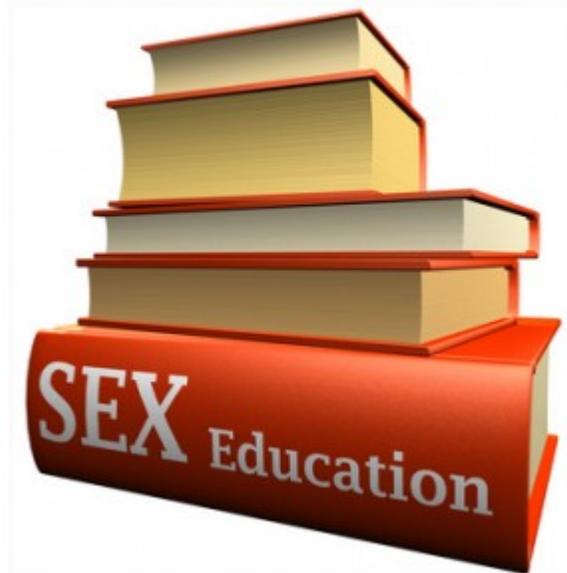
A distinct advantage of a family sexual policies statement is that no one child is singled out. Each child has the same rules regarding sexual behaviors. This list is reviewed as a family. Some families opt to have each member of the family sign this policy statement.

- Parents are clear about the laws in their geographic region regarding what types of sexual activity must be reported to the local children’s services agency. Parents understand that various professionals—teachers,

school administrators counselors, social workers, psychologists, etc.—are “mandated reporters.” These professionals *must* legally report sexual activity to the local children’s services agency.

Creating a Sexually Healing Home Environment

Once safety and supervision are established, parents need to turn their attention to creating a home environment that is open and honest regarding sex and sexuality. Certainly, this is hard! But, it is necessary for healing!



For some families, they must educate their typical children about sexual matters long before the age desired by parents. This suggestion connotes becoming comfortable using direct, anatomically correct language—frequently! Many of us were raised by parents who never mentioned the word “sex” or who gave us the very basic facts. Parents of adopted sexually reactive children will have to go far beyond their parents’ teachings to manage sexual behavior in their home. In Chapter 3, [Brothers and Sisters in Adoption](#), there are questions parents can ask themselves to help broaden their own sexual awareness and competence.

For example, regarding an adoptee who “gropes” his mother during temper tantrums, we want to state clearly and as matter of factly as possible,

“I don’t like it when you grab my breasts (or vagina). I would prefer you hug me, when you need my attention/affection. In this family, we (the parents) don’t have sex with the children.”

In another case, the youngster “humps” the mother during rages. The statement here would be,

“I don’t like it when you rub your penis on my leg. I would prefer to offer you a backrub, a hug or a kiss on the cheek when you need my attention. In this family, Dad and I don’t have sex with our children.”

Adoptive moms and dads may need to practice these statements—for a time period—prior to implementation. Certainly no parent expected to need to say such things to their children! Yet, being concise and direct is important. It has become common practice to utilize “inappropriate” or “appropriate.” My perspective is that such language minimizes

5 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

the severity of this particular behavior. I prefer to tell a child exactly what behavior to cease. I want children to tell me precisely what behavior they are engaging in. This lends to accepting responsibility. Recently, I was evaluating an adolescent,

I asked, "Why are you here for this assessment?"

He stated, "I act inappropriate with my younger sisters."

I asked, "What does that mean?"

He stated, "I do things to them."

I said, "What kind of things?"

He responded, "You know. Things!"

I finally said, "Like, you put your penis in their vaginas?"

He said, "That sounds terrible!"

I said, "It is. In order to return to your family, you must learn to keep your penis in your pants."

Language is an important part of the healing process! It wasn't helping this young man, his sisters or his parents to allow him to believe that he was doing "things" to his siblings!

Another advantage of clear and direct language includes that the statement, "*Dad and I don't have sex with our children*", lets the adoptee know that he or she is now in a safe place. Children are safe from each other, and children are safe from adults. It may take time for your adopted son or daughter to believe this message.



After the statement is complete, demonstrate the type of affection you would prefer. Practice the hug, cuddle, snuggle, etc.

A final point about our two examples is that the conversation may need to occur after the meltdown —when the child and parent are calm. Talking to children during rages is akin to reasoning with an intoxicated person—he or she isn't hearing you, and so an escalation is likely to occur. We also need to comprehend that this discussion may need to be

6 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

conducted often and over a long period of time. While most children can bring their sexual behavior in line with the family's values and morals, changing any behavior takes time!

Parenting and Healing the Sexually Acting Out Adoptee - Part Two

Living with a child that sexually acts out is very hard as Part One made clear. Most often, such behavior is totally unexpected post-placement. Parents and the resident children are shocked! Day-to-day life becomes complicated! Every facet of the family's life begins to revolve around the level of supervision that can be provided. This is exhausting! Safety must be accomplished within a myriad of emotions. Parents wrestle with guilt when the sexual relations are exposed. How could we let this happen? Why us? Why our family? How will we live like this? Where will we get help? What kind of help do we need? How will our non-sexual children survive this? Will our adopted son or daughter grow up to be a sexual predator? The list goes on! Sorrow, anger, depression and frustration set in!



Part One began to address the above. It covered the development and implementation of a "safety plan" and a "family sexual policies" statement. It initiated our discussion about the creation of a "sexually healing home environment." Below we complete this conversation. We also offer perspective on the role of the mental health professional.

Creating a Sexually Healing Home Environment – continued

Unfortunately, adults are not the only targets of the sexually acting out child. Brothers and sisters are exposed to unwanted sexual behaviors. In a case in which a sibling has been victimized— if old enough to talk—we want to sit

7 Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

down with the children involved. Ceasing this behavior becomes a joint family endeavor. Each family member is on the "same page"—working together to help the new addition learn to act like the family.

The parent could say,

"Touching Betty's vagina is against the rules in this family. Children don't have sex with children in this family. You must apologize to Betty. Betty you must make it clear to your sister that you don't like it when she touches your vagina."

Betty then states,

"I don't like it when you touch my vagina. I do like it when we can play dolls together, or color. Anytime you touch my vagina, I will be letting mom or dad know."

This conversation would be short and direct. We don't want to belabor or lecture. We simply want to make the point and move on. Facebook comments about this blog post even include one dad who sings about the rules related to sexual behavior. This is a wonderful way to deal with sexual acting out as well as other negative behaviors!

Siblings—typical and offending—must understand that anything considered sexually inappropriate definitely gets reported to their mom and dad, just as any other rule violation that jeopardizes safety.

There are juvenile perpetrators that threaten their siblings, *"If you tell Mom or Dad, I'll hurt you!"* Kids do sometimes believe these threats. I have worked many cases in which these sibling sexual relations have been kept secret because of such intimidation. I encourage parents to "check in" with all of their children periodically. Ask, *"Has Johnny tried to touch you sexually? If so, I want you to know that I can protect you, and you need to tell me."* Still, there are instances in which the children will not tell. The only advice to offer is to be as vigilant as possible, and to know that sexual interactions can and do happen among children. Don't bury your head in the sand!

The offending child must then carry out some type of restitution as described in our previous post, "Sorry": Building Your Adoptee's Moral Development. Restitution is essential. It builds empathy and teaches remorse. Keep restitution simple. A three-minute chore is effective. A review of the "Family's Sexual Policies" (see Part One) is also in order. Again, repetition is the key to ceasing undesired behaviors. Any necessary reporting to your local children's services needs to be handled. Long-term—if the sexual behavior continues—the consequences will come from the legal system.

Obviously, such conversations must have the pre-cursor that your children understand what is meant by the word "sex." Children who were sexually abused prior to arrival in the adoptive family, are often familiar with slang—"pussy," "dick," "cock," "getting it on," "do it like dogs," and so on. Often, they don't understand that such language and sexual acts are disrespectful (to their body and mind) and criminal!

There are also children who join their family at very young ages with sexualized behavior from which we don't know the root cause—it could be a self-stimulating behavior—rather than the result of sexual abuse. In any event, it can be handled as already stated,

Colleen and Roy have two sons and a daughter by birth; Tori, Glenn and Nathan are ages 11, 9 and 8. Colleen and Roy felt very blessed. They had three great children, thriving careers, a lovely home, and wonderful friends and relatives. Rather than having a fourth birth child, they opted to share their good fortune with a child in need of a home. They flew to Belarus and arrived back in America with 22-month-old Aimee.

Aimee presented immediate difficulties. She was unable to sleep for longer than two hours at a time. When awake, she cried constantly. She also masturbated chronically. It was not uncommon to find Aimee in the living room—fully naked—masturbating. It is not known if Aimee was sexually abused during her stay in Belarus or if she learned to stimulate herself by masturbating in order to survive the deprivation of the orphanage environment.

In this case, Colleen and Roy had already initiated “sex education” with Tori. Glenn and Nathan were totally surprised by their sister’s behavior, and certainly asked, “What is Aimee doing?” So, Glenn and Nathan needed to know,

“She is masturbating. Masturbation is a type of sexual behavior in which the person rubs their own penis or vagina. Rubbing her vagina feels good to her. We don’t want Aimee masturbating, and we don’t want you masturbating either.”

Then, this conversation needs to continue with the full explanation of sexual behavior, including the difference between Aimee’s vagina and Glenn and Nathan’s penis. Subsequently, Glenn, Nathan and Tori were taught to say to Aimee,

“In this family, we don’t masturbate. Please put your clothes back on.”

Then, mom or dad was informed of the behavior. Mom or dad’s response is a reiteration,

“Aimee, in this family, children don’t masturbate. Please take your hand off your vagina. Let’s get your clothes back on. You must be feeling lonely or sad. Sit here on my lap and let’s have a hug.”

Yes, Aimee is just a toddler and we are talking with her explicitly. We want to! We want her to grow into “normal” sexual language, and into the values and morals of the family. The earlier we start this process, the more Aimee should adjust her behavior. We actually do this same process instilling religious tenets, political views, etc. Parents routinely have conversations about all kinds of topics in front of their children. As kids become school-age, they have internalized their parents’ views on a wide array of issues. Sex and sexuality can be treated in this same manner with young and older children alike. When a child arrives sexualized, it is never too early or too late to get started teaching the child the appropriate way to act sexually.

One other aspect of this example of Aimee and her family, is that “normal” adolescents do go through a period of masturbation—especially boys. Thus, Colleen and Roy must make a decision as to how to present this “normal” facet of adolescent sexual development, and to present it within the family’s religious and/or moral beliefs.



KEY POINTS

Creating a Sexually Healing Home Environment

Point One

Offer all your children sexual education—starting as early as need be. The child with a history of sexual abuse needs “normal” sexual information, as do typical children.

Point Two

Learn to speak about sexual matters in a direct manner, using anatomically correct language. Clearly define what is and is not acceptable in your home via your Family Sexual Policies statement.

Point Three

In the event there is sexual acting out, learn to make clear statements starting with “In this family...”

- *“In this family, children don’t rub their penis on the couch.”*
- *“In this family, children don’t put sticks in the dog’s butt.”*
- *“In this family, we close the bathroom door when using the toilet, showering and getting dressed.”*
- *“In this family, parents don’t have sex with children. I know this is different than in your birth family (or orphanage). We expect you to learn this difference and act like a member of this family.”*

10

Arleta James, PCC, ABC of Ohio, 440-230-1960, arletajames@gmail.com, www.arletajames.com, *Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family* (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

- *"In this family, children don't have sex with children. I do know that when you were in the orphanage, you had sex with the other kids. However, in this family, there is no sex among the children. We expect you will learn this difference between a family and an orphanage." Or, the wording may be, "In this family, there is no masturbation. I do know that you learned to rub your vagina because you were lonely in the orphanage. Rubbing your vagina took away that sad feeling. I can help you with your sad and scared now. Come over here and I'll give you a hug."*

Just as children who join the family via adoption learn the rules about where to put dirty laundry, what time to do homework, how to feed the dog and so on, these children need to learn the rules about sexual behavior.

As you progress in your capacity to speak frankly, add this content discerning between the child's current and previous residence. Doing so is a type of "claiming" activity. Claiming the adoptee is an important means of creating an attachment. Claiming helps to psychologically separate the child from his or her past; "That was then. This is now." Thus, the child moves on and joins the adoptive family. As stated in Part One, children with greater attachments to the adoptive family, take on the family's values and morals—they shed the behaviors learned in previous homes or institutional settings.



Point Four

A "re-placement behavior" must be provided. Nurture—"good touch"—is offered to the sexual child. We speak much of "good touch" vs. "bad touch" in the Child Welfare and Mental Health systems. Applying "good touch" is an essential component of any intervention designed to cease sexual behaviors. Yet, very frequently parents are discouraged from offering hugs, kisses, back rubs, etc. —good touch—to the formerly abused child. Instead it is suggested to "wait" until the child comes forward for affection. Really, the sexual advances are the child coming forward! For many children, sex is the way they have learned to be affectionate or to be valued. I would suggest that we need to offer these children "good touch" immediately upon placement with the adoptive family. Nurture is critical to the healthy development of ALL children. Humans seek touch. If we don't offer "good touch", we force children to continue their learned pattern of seeking "bad touch." I elaborate on my viewpoint in my previous post, Nurture and the Sexually Abused or Aggressive Adoptee

Therefore, just as we teach the 3-year-old to "ask" rather than "take" a cookie, we need to teach the sexual child to "stop rubbing your vagina during a family movie night. Instead, come here and snuggle by mom or dad." If need be, we can always preface our gestures of affection,

"Mom is going to give you a hug good-night. That's all—just a hug. I won't be having sex with you—ever. In this family, parents don't have sex with their children."

Point Five

We also want to teach all of our children our values about the relationship in which sexual acts should occur. Often—once initiated—we do a wonderful job teaching children sex education. Yet, we need to be aware that the child with a history of sexual abuse knows about sexual acts. I have worked with children who unfortunately know far more about sexual acts than I do! The post-institutionalized child learned to obtain wants and needs from adults. These children are naïve about relationships. We must encourage them to develop human connections in which sex is a beautiful part of that couple's display of love and commitment to one another. Start early as well with regards to this aspect of sexuality. Forming relationships—as many adoptive moms and dads know—can be a lifelong process for the adoptee that arrived after a history of trauma.

Point Six

Joint parental participation—in two parent families—is essential. Unity between parenting partners generates more efficacious healing, than does “being a single parent in a two-parent family.”

Point Seven

Parents are encouraged to refrain from doling out trust until there has been genuine healing of the sexual child.

In conclusion, I do invite readers dealing with sexually acting out children to ask questions to gain information tailored to their specific situation. Readers are welcome to email me Arletaj@aol.com or visit me on [facebook](https://www.facebook.com/).