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Repetitive Genital Exploration

What is it?

The strategies discussed in this advice sheet are for children and young people who engage in repetitive exploration of their genitals, either excessively or in public. This may include both boys and girls exploring their genitals with their hands, or grinding/rubbing against furniture. This behaviour is typically part of normal development, seen in young children from around 2 years of age, often when they first find their genitals and want to explore. It is also typical during adolescence, in line with hormonal changes. However for some children and young people, particularly those with additional needs, it can become excessive, resulting in a habit which is difficult to break.

Possible reasons for repetitive genital exploration

- As most children explore their genitals when young, it may be that they have enjoyed the feeling it provides and therefore continue to do it. They may not understand why it's inappropriate to do it in public.
- It may provide some children with comfort when they are anxious, providing an aspect of control in new and different situations.
- Some children may use it to distract themselves from pain.
- It may be used when children are upset as a way to express emotions.
- When a child or young person explores their genitals excessively, it's difficult for caregivers not to react or provide attention, this can further encourage the child to continue to do it.
- Although the child/young person may enjoy the sensation this is providing, it is usually unlikely that it is related to a specific sensory processing need and more likely for the reasons stated above.

How to respond

- Try not to worry – exploring genitals is a normal stage of development that many children go through. It typically goes away without any intervention being required.
- Try not to over react, as you may inadvertently reinforce the behaviour. Even if you can't completely ignore the behaviour, don't scold or punish them for it. Your disapproval may only make matters worse and providing lots of attention may encourage them to do it more.
- If the child is engaging in this behaviour excessively and at inappropriate times, consider providing some positive redirection by moving them onto an activity they enjoy.
- Give the child lots of positive attention when they are not engaging in self-stimulating/genital exploration and when they are playing or engaging appropriately.

- Reward good behaviours with specific praise, for example, “Well done for putting your toys back in the box”.
- Sometimes a change in environment can help to break the habit.
- Provide opportunities for self-regulation such as incorporating deep pressure and movement activities into the child’s daily routine. This can be done through deep pressure massage, rolling the child up in a duvet to make a hot dog, time on a therapy/peanut ball, use of a trampoline or playground equipment or going for a walk or run.
- Make sure the child gets lots of opportunities for physical exercise during the day, to help burn off some of the nervous energy that may feed self-stimulating behaviour.
- Keep hands busy - try offering an alternative object such as a fidget toy, particularly those they can squeeze such as blue tac or stress balls, a stuffed toy or vibrating toy which can be placed on arms, back and shoulders.

If self-stimulation continues as the child gets older, it may be that this is in line with adolescence and hormonal changes, but that they don’t understand why it isn’t appropriate to do it in public.

- Support the child/young person with understanding that it is not appropriate to explore their genitals in public or in social situations - a social story and/or visual supports may help with this. There are many examples of these online including on the National Autistic Society website.
- Provide a room where they can engage in these behaviours in such as the bathroom or a bedroom. They may need a separate room in school such as a toilet or changing room where they can do this without being disturbed. Again, a social story may help them to understand what’s appropriate and when and where they can explore their genitals. Put a time limit on it, so that they understand they need to re-join their classmates/family when the timer has finished – sand or visual timers may help with this.
- Ensure you use appropriate communication for the child/young person, whether this is verbal, use of Makaton signs or visual symbols.

Be consistent between home and school and do not give up – children respond well to consistency. It can be confusing for children if caregivers respond in different ways to the same behaviour. It is important that everyone close to the child responds in the same way to the behaviour. Also remember that solutions take time so do not give up.

Seek advice from your Health Visitor, School Nurse or GP if:

- You are worried your child may have an infection in or around their genitals
- You are concerned that the child is hurting themselves.