**Youth who were abused often strive for a way to protect themselves or exercise control over their bodies after trauma.**

**Your child may exhibit these hypo-sexualized behaviors**

* Fear of being touched
* Confusing a kind touch, hug, or kiss as an invitation to engage in sex
* Difficulty or confusion with boundaries between non-sexual touches and sexual touches.
* A feeling of disgust toward their body, or specific parts of their bodies that were used by an abuser for arousal or sexual activity.
* An unwillingness to take care of personal hygiene
* Attempts to harm, damage, or injure parts of their body that were affected by the perpetrator.
* Lack of sexual interest in others.
* Perhaps most common, encouraging a lack of sexual interest in themselves by over-eating to obesity, which causes more health issues later.

**Your child may exhibit these hyper-sexualized behaviors**

* Sexualized speech or cursing focused on sexual behavior.
* Excessive touching of their genitals in public or inappropriate places like a locker room or bedroom with friends.
* Re-enacting sexual activities they have observed or experienced, such as scenes from a TV show or movie.
* Frequent sexual partners of all ages.
* Obsessive pornography use, which can confuse expressions of love for performing sexual acts.
* Teenage boys are more likely to engage in aggressive hyper-sexualized activites, such as forcing others against a bed, furniture, or floor.
* Teenage girls are more likely to allow sexual acts to be perpetrated on them, leading to pregnancy as a way to feel assured someone—such as a baby—will love them.

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| Kids of all ages may begin to overeat, stop bathing, or make themselves as unattractive as possible in pursuit of protecting themselves against further sexual advances. This is called **hypo-sexualization**. | **Hyper-sexualization** is where youth develop unhealthy and excessive sexual relationships, pornography habits, and flirtatious behavior that go beyond inappropriate or expected teenage relationships and behaviors. |

Age, gender, and whether or not your child has or is undergoing puberty can also heavily alter sexualized behaviors. But with time, *your* behavior and relationship to *your* partners, spouse, family, and friends can reverse mentally unhealthy behaviors a child learned from the abuser.

Youth who have been sexually-abused by a trusted adult are more likely to develop signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – which can be confused for hyper- and hypo-sexualized behavior and/or contribute to it.

Teenagers who are sexual abuse victims often exhibit signs of PTSD through persistent depression, anxiety, and acts of self-harm such as cutting themselves or attempting suicide.

Unlike some teenagers, **children do not yet have the mature brain capacity to understand their bodies’ sexual functions**, nor the appropriate physical, emotional, and sexual boundaries to know what’s inappropriate.

A young child who is smiling at the camera

Description automatically generatedThis is why sexually abused children are more likely to mimic their abuser’s behaviors and need more reinforcement to un-learn the lessons learned from their abuser, especially if the abuse happened over a long period of time.

Given time and consistent behaviors to emulate from you, your child can un-learn bad behaviors.

**Sexually abused youth can also exhibit both signs of hyper- and hypo-sexualization**. For example, a teenage girl may be unable to experience sexual arousal but still engage in intercourse with numerous peers.

A teenage boy may not be able to experience arousal but perpetrates sexually abusive behavior on others despite the lack of any sexual feeling experienced.

Since sexual abuse typically has more to do with power over the victim than sexual pleasure, victims of sexual abuse often experience heightened feelings of powerlessness and a strong need to overcome these feelings.

**How to Cope with a Child (or Teenager) who is Hypo- or Hyper-Sexualized**

A close up of a person

Description automatically generatedThe sexually abused child in your care needs to un-learn the lessons taught by the abuser as to what is appropriate sexual behavior – since inappropriate behavior is what the child has internalized. In other words, the child needs to learn what is acceptable and not acceptable behavior toward self and other people, perhaps for a second time. That re-learning will take time, and the child in your care needs to receive that knowledge through the following:

* Boost their self-esteem through positive feedback about their achievements and accomplishments.
* Make sure the child knows you care about them through your words and actions.
* Avoid harsh discipline to inappropriately-sexualized speech and activities. Still explain why their speech or actions are unacceptable to you and set limits (*i.e.,* take away their cell phone for an hour) and do what you say you’re going to do.
* Set clear boundaries so that the child or teenager cannot be confused about what is or isn’t acceptable to you about how they speak and behave. Reinforce those clearly-established boundaries in a consistent manner.
* Act as a role model of appropriate behavior to reverse the effect on the child of the abuser-as-role-model. You’ll also enable the child to understand appropriate behavior in various day-to-day interpersonal interactions – as your actions will speak much louder than words!
* Recognize the child will probably fail at times to adhere to your boundaries or regress into past negative behaviors. This is likely due to the perpetrator’s lack of respect for their physical, psychological, and sexual boundaries. Be patient, be consistent.
* Don’t be afraid to seek professional help. Your physician, Victim Advocate, or a certified Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) can help you and your child move forward through counseling and therapy backed by research and experience.