

Inappropriate Sexualised Behaviour in the Classroom:

A short case study

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The following article is an excerpt from the JFMHN Newsletter from Summer 2020 (AMHDAP [Adolescent Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Programs] gives you access to a team of clinicians and psychiatrists who specialise in forensic mental health. Send through any questions you have regarding the needs of Young People involved in the criminal justice system to JFMHN-Schoollink@health.nsw.gov.au

I have a 12 year old boy Kingston (not his real name) with a mild intellectual disability in my class. About two weeks ago, I noticed that he was often putting his hand down his pants in class, and just the other day, he began masturbating in the classroom, and was also masturbating on the school bus. Other students who saw this behaviour reacted by either laughing at him or becoming aggressive towards him, and some of the girls seemed frightened by his behaviour.

These reactions made Kingston feel upset. I had initially redirected Kingston to keep his hand out of his pants, and have since spoken to Kingston's parents about the masturbation incident. They seemed shocked and embarrassed and said they would have a talk to him and would be grounding him. Can you please give me some advice on how to support Kingston with this incident, as well as the other students? Thanks!

Hi,
It's really great you reached out to ask us this question as it is not uncommon for people with an intellectual disability to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviour such as masturbating in public. **Masturbation itself however, is actually a healthy and natural way for people to express their sexuality although when it is done in a private place.** We therefore want to refrain from responding to Kingston in a way that makes him think that masturbating is not acceptable, as it is appropriate for a boy his age (e.g. by Kingston's parents grounding him, it may evoke feelings of shame and thoughts that masturbating is wrong).

Have conversations with Kingston using simple, concrete words, about boundaries, such as when and where it is acceptable to masturbate, what he is thinking and feeling, and to try and understand why he is masturbating in class and on the bus (i.e. what is the function of the behaviour). It would also be helpful to

see what his level of understanding is of sexual health, and you could collaborate with learning support staff, the school counsellor, local youth health services, NSW Family Planning or The Children's Hospital at Westmead School-Link to deliver information suited to his developmental level, and in a way that he understands e.g. by using visuals, social stories (see example in our own newsletter here).



In using the ‘traffic light tool,’ I would say that Kingston’s masturbating in class and on the bus is ‘concerning’ (orange) as although it was in public and has caused others to feel frightened or uncomfortable, the behaviour is age appropriate, has happened twice, and seemed spontaneous. Providing intervention and support at this early stage will hopefully prevent or reduce the likelihood of it happening again.

Individuals with intellectual disability generally have more limited social networks, and therefore less opportunities to learn about socially appropriate behaviours and the effect of behaviour on others.

Asking Kingston about the impact of his behaviour (for example, “What did your classmates do when they saw you masturbate in class? Did they look comfortable or uncomfortable?”) or providing information around this can allow him to develop empathy for others and positively affect his ability to manage his behaviour.

Try and **be aware of when Kingston is about to masturbate** (e.g. has his hand down his pants) **in order to remind and redirect him back to task.** If the public masturbation continues, it is best to respond in a calm, matter-of-fact manner as you would with any other inappropriate behaviour. This will also help Kingston to stay calm as children and young people take their cues from us and may feel upset if there is a strong negative reaction. Ask Kingston to stop the behaviour and remind him of the difference between private and public behaviours. These reminders may need to happen multiple times before he learns more appropriate behaviour. For example, you might say to Kingston: *“I saw that you were masturbating in class before lunch. Masturbating is what you do in a private place, like in your room at home. School is a public place so you need to keep your hands outside your clothes. Masturbating makes other students feel uncomfortable and upset. I can see it makes you upset too when they feel this way. If you feel like masturbating again, you need to do it in private at home and not at school.”*

A **behaviour support plan** can be created with Kingston, his parents and support staff to assist him in developing more appropriate behaviours and for him to be praised and positively reinforced when he does. Doing so ensures that information and boundaries provided to Kingston are clear and consistent. Both school and parents can monitor his behaviour and help him to self-regulate his behaviour.

Conversations with students who have witnessed the behaviour could also be about sexual health, sexuality,

“Information and boundaries provided are clear and consistent”

and all the changes (that may seem strange and scary!) that happen to their bodies, and to their thoughts, feelings and behaviour when they go through puberty – and that it is OK to be curious about these things! It should be reiterated that aggressive or bullying behaviour is unacceptable and students can explore how they can be kind and supportive of one another.

Keep in mind that due to his intellectual disability, Kingston is more at risk than others of being exploited. Students should be encouraged to let you know if Kingston or any other student engages in inappropriate behaviour so that it can be managed. Where necessary, referrals for counselling support can be made for Kingston and other students. You can also speak with your Head Teacher or Welfare Team regarding support for yourself.

Download a copy of the JHFMHN newsletter on the CHW School-Link website
www.schoolink.chw.edu.au

Family Planning Resources:

About Masturbation for Males/ About Masturbation for Females (Booklet NSW family Planning 2007/2011)
Two separate booklets that teach about positive masturbation messages. The booklets use black and white line drawings and easy English in a story to teach about masturbation, privacy and hygiene. Includes additional notes for parents, carers and workers.

Hand Made Love: A guide for teaching about male masturbation through understanding and video (Hingsburger 1995)

A book and DVD set that discusses privacy, pleasure and the realities of sharing living spaces with others. The DVD includes a demonstration of male masturbation with simple voice over descriptions. Also available: *Finger Tips: A guide for teaching about female masturbation through understanding and video.*

These DVDs contain explicit material and is available for loan from NSW Family Planning

<https://www.fpnsw.org.au/who-we-help/disability/disability-resources>