

Harmful Sexual Behaviour: What Professionals Need to Know

It can be difficult for professionals to think about children sexually abusing other children. Children may engage in behaviours that are harmful to other children without realising that they are abusive. As adults, it can be challenging to identify what is developmentally appropriate behaviour, particularly for younger children or children with disabilities.

Definition

The Department for Education defines Harmful Sexual Behaviour as sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult.

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) is part of a continuum of behaviours displayed by children. Children may engage in a range of behaviours that would be deemed normal and healthy for their sexual developmental stage. However, behaviours that are considered harmful are those that are outside the expected developmental norms of the child.

HSB can occur in person or online. It can be displayed toward peers, towards younger or older children, or adults. It is important to note that HSB can be harmful for both the person displaying the behaviour and the person it is directed at.

Examples of Harmful Sexual Behaviour:

- Sexual assault
- Sexual interactions where there are significant power differences (age, size, status, developmental stage)
- Non-consensual touching
- Sexist name-calling
- Rumours about a person's sexual activity
- Sending sexualised images or videos
- Pressurising others to provide sexual images of themselves
- Circulating sexualised videos or images without consent or knowledge

The importance of language

Use language that reinforces that we are working to safeguard children. Using the term 'child' if they are under 18 years old helps to prevent adultification. Remember that children are still developing emotionally, socially and sexually. The use of safe and appropriate terminology avoids creating any sense of stigma, shame or trauma for children.



What we know

- There is no accurate prevalence data that includes all harmful sexual behaviours in the UK
- According to the [Centre of Expertise for Child Sexual Abuse](#), children are responsible for a significant proportion of child sexual abuse
- Boys and girls can exhibit HSB
- There are concerns about the normalisation of sexual harassment and abuse between children in schools
- Children who display sexually harmful behaviour are more likely to have been sexually abused or experience other types of abuse or neglect
- The majority of harmful sexual behaviour involves children who are well known to one other.

Please click on the images for the Sibling sexual abuse briefing and the CSA centre briefing on HSB for more relevant information.



How do you know if a child's sexual behaviour is age appropriate?

All children are individuals and develop in their own way. There is a well evidenced and accepted range of sexual behaviours that are linked to a child's age and developmental stage. Children are curious and explore their sexuality as they grow up. If you are worried about a child's sexual behaviour face to face or online, it may be an indication that it is harmful. Consider the child's developmental stage as well as their chronological age.

Hackett (2010) developed a traffic light tool to support practitioners in assessing a child's sexual behaviour, the aim is to support objective decision making.



Everyone who volunteers or works with children should be able to differentiate between developmentally typical sexual behaviours and those that are harmful or problematic. Locally, Brook deliver training on the traffic light tool with the training considering children with additional needs, complex health and disabilities.

Please book on to the course and other relevant courses that are on offer [here](#).

Assessing behaviour

It is helpful to remember that exploratory play and experimentation is an expected part of childhood, therefore sexual behaviours are not always a safeguarding concern. Remaining aware of our own values, and ensuring that these do not impair our judgement, is core to safeguarding practice.

Actively consider whether a behaviour is harmful for the child that is demonstrating it, as well as those it is directed towards.

Think about the following examples - what would you need to take into account?

- a 4 year old showing their genitals to others.
- a 12 year old sending or sharing sexual images.
- an 8 year old regularly using aggressive sexual language about others.
- a 17 year old viewing sexually inappropriate content.
- a 14 year old being secretive about their online activity.
- a 3 year old insisting or frequently touching children without their consent.
- a 15 year old seeking the company of younger, or more vulnerable, children and spending an unusual amount of time with them.

Safeguarding children with disabilities

Children with disabilities face an increased risk of sexual abuse, they often have multiple carers, they may need personal care, and their disability may mean that they are unable to recognise that they are being abused and/or seek help. A child's disability can increase the likelihood of 'inappropriate' sexual behaviours. It is important to consider any behaviour as a form of communication, and in the context of the child's needs. Explanations for behaviour could include impaired social awareness, challenges in social communication, or that the child is fulfilling a basic sensory need. Remember that behaviour could also be how a child is communicating that something has happened to them.

More widely, research points to challenges in the provision of preventative relationship and sex education. This contributes to our understanding of the context in which children may be abused, or demonstrate behaviour that could be deemed 'inappropriate' or harmful. Does the child understand what the worry about a behaviour is? How can we help them to?



Practice Briefing:
Communicating with children
with disabilities

Professional Curiosity

Keep an open mind - remember that HSB could be an indicator that the child has been abused. Exploring the context, considering the child's developmental stage and the family's wider needs will support your safeguarding practice.

Early intervention that addresses a difficulty or problem before it becomes entrenched is the most effective way to safeguard and support children. This includes helping parents and carers to accept and understand that support to address behaviour is required, and that it is in their child's best interests. All children, are children first and foremost, irrespective of their behaviour.

Useful tips for safeguarding practice

- Respond to concerns in a calm way. It is important the child knows they can approach you if they are worried about their own, or others behaviour, without fear of being judged
- Use the child's language where appropriate or paraphrase to ensure that the information is accurate
- Provide time and be patient with the child, this may be the first time that they may have sought support
- Limit the number of distractions and pay attention to body language
- Provide reassurance, explain that they have done the right thing by telling you and explain what your next steps will be
- Follow your safeguarding policy
- Seek support from your manager or safeguarding lead. This is a complex subject
- Attend training to improve your knowledge about this topic so that you can speak to children with confidence and direct them to useful resources locally or nationally



Hint: Promoting engagement from children and caregivers leads to better outcomes. Some children and their parents or carers may struggle to acknowledge sexually inappropriate behaviour. Help them see assessments as an exploration of what has happened, and how we can best support them.

What to do if you are concerned:

- Speak to the **safeguarding lead** within your organisation
- If you are worried about a child contact the **Stronger Families Hub** on **01895 556006** and complete the [referral form](#)
- Sexual Abuse is a crime, if you believe a child is at **immediate risk**, call the **police** on **999**.
- Think about the **therapeutic and emotional support** for the children and carers regardless of the police investigation or outcomes.



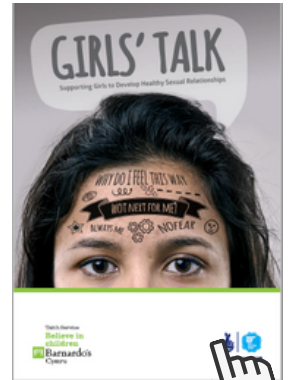
Resources to Support Safeguarding Practice

Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service

A support service for professionals in tackling harmful sexual behaviours.



Barnardo's has developed Girls' Talk, a resource pack for practitioners supporting girls who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour.



The Lucy Faithfull foundation have created this helpful toolkit for Harmful sexual behaviour



NHS
West London
NHS Trust
Forensic child and adolescent mental health services (FCAMHS)



Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harmful Behaviour Tool Kit created by Fearless under Crimestoppers



Early emotional support for children and young people, aged 3-18 (and their families), who have disclosed sexual abuse.



A safety planning guide for professionals supporting children following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour



An online reporting tool where people can report child sexual abuse content and get it removed from online.



Shore is a safe space that is available for children worried about sexual behaviour

Targeted programmes for children and adolescents aged 8 to 24-year-olds who live, learn or earn in Hillingdon and may benefit from additional targeted support.



Thames Valley Police Video on Consent

