

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Overview Description

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is defined 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 be abusive towards another child, young person or adult’.

(Hackett 2014 Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours)

It may also be referred to as sexually harmful behaviour or sexualised behaviour.

HSB encompasses a range of behaviour, which can be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults. It is harmful to the children and young people who display it, as well as the people it is directed towards. It includes:

- using sexually explicit words and phrases
- inappropriate touching
- using sexual violence or threats
- full penetrative sex with other children or adults.

Technology assisted HSB

The link between on-line behaviour and harmful sexual behaviour may also be a cause for concern. Technology assisted HSB (TA-HSB) is sexualised behaviour which children or young people engage in using the internet or technology such as mobile phones. (Hollis and Belton, 2017).

More information is given later in this chapter.

Where concerns about SHB exist, it requires professionals from all agencies to work together at an early stage so that all information available can be evaluated and an understanding of the needs of the child/young person can be assessed.

In Manchester we follow the **‘Greater Manchester Protocol for Harmful Sexual Behaviours presented by children and young people’** which can be found here:

https://greatermanchesterscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_harm_sex.html

This provides detailed advice about how to proceed when harmful sexual behaviour is a concern. The information in this chapter does not seek to replace that protocol and readers are advised to access information via the link above and via **Manchester Safeguarding Partnership** website:

<https://www.manchestersafeguardingpartnership.co.uk/resource/harmful-sexual-behaviours-advice-practitioners/>

Please also refer to the chapter in this toolkit entitled [Childhood Sexual Exploitation](#) as many themes overlap.

Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour

Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour are likely to have considerable levels of unmet need themselves. In many cases they can hold dual identities as both the perpetrator of abuse and the victim of harm (Hackett, 2014). Evidence suggests that children and young people who harm others may have suffered considerable disruption in their lives, been exposed to violence within the family, may have witnessed or been subject to physical abuse or sexual abuse, have problems in their educational development and may have committed other offences.

Such children and young people are likely to be 'Children in Need', some will have experienced 'Significant Harm' and may be in need of protection themselves.

Children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be held responsible for their harmful behaviour while being identified and responded to in a way which meets their needs as well as protecting others.

Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour are often developing their own sexuality and understanding of relationships. Research clearly indicates that good assessment and early intervention, which addresses risk and builds resilience for the child or young person, produce the best outcomes.

A Continuum of Sexual Behaviours from Healthy to Harmful

It can be useful to think of sexual behaviour as a range or continuum from those behaviours that are developmentally and socially accepted to those that are violent and abusive. (See **Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours, Research in Practice**, https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/children_and_young_people_with_harmful_sexual_behaviours_research_review_2014.pdf)

Not all sexual behaviours displayed by children/ young people are healthy; some are harmful and some are seen as problematic. The term problematic is used to indicate that the behaviour is problematic for someone whether for the child or young person themselves or someone else who is uncomfortable with the invasion of their personal space by a child/adolescent with little sense of boundaries.

The following behaviours give a general indication of categories and are more applicable to younger children:

Healthy sexual behaviours are:

- Mutual;
- Consensual;
- Exploratory and age appropriate;
- No intent to cause harm;
- Fun, humorous;
- No power differential between participants.

Problematic sexual behaviours are:

- Displaying behaviours not age appropriate - e.g. invasion of personal space, sexual swear word in very young children;
- Some 'one off' incidents of low-key behaviours such as touching over clothing;
- Incidents where there is peer pressure to engage in the behaviour e.g. touching someone's breast, exposure of bottom;
- Behaviours are spontaneous rather than planned;
- They may be self-directed such as masturbation;
- There are other balancing factors such as lack of intent to cause harm, or level of understanding in the young person about the behaviours, or some remorse;
- The child or young person targeted may be irritated or uncomfortable but not scared and feel free to tell someone;
- Parental concern and interested in supporting the child to change.

Harmful sexual behaviours are:

- Not age appropriate;
- Elements of planning secrecy or force;
- Power differentials between young people involved such as size status and strength;
- Targeted children feel fear anxiety discomfort;
- Negative feelings are expressed by the young person when carrying out the behaviour e.g. anger aggression;
- The young person does not take responsibility for the behaviour and blames others or feels a strong sense of grievance;
- Incidents are increasing in frequency and the young person's interest in them is disproportionate to other aspects of their life;
- They are not easily distracted from the behaviour, it appears compulsive and is persistent despite intervention.

Technology Assisted HSB

This might include:

- Possessing, making and/or distributing pornography (including extreme pornography or viewing indecent images of children)
- exposing other children and young people to indecent images
- sexting

Research undertaken for NSPCC in 2017 suggested that children and young people are often found to display both TA-HSB and offline HSB and so the two should therefore be explored together rather than being treated as two distinct behaviours. (Hollis and Belton, 2017). This research can be found here:

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1083/exploring-technology-assisted-harmful-sexual-behaviour.pdf>.

The AIM Assessment

The AIM (Assessment Intervention Moving on) project developed an assessment framework model in Manchester in 2000. It was based on the principle that the welfare of children is paramount and the primary objective of undertaking work with young people who abuse others is to prevent future victims. The Framework was revised into AIM3 in 2007, 2012 and most recently in 2019, based on further research and evidence. The AIM project exists to oversee the development of the assessment framework and provides training and support to promote its use alongside an assessment model for children under 12 years and other models for the identification and management across key agencies of children and young people who harm sexually.

Greater Manchester Safeguarding (GMP) has taken the view that the AIM3 model of assessment meets the requirements for this group of children and young people. The AIM3 covers five domains:

- **Sexual Behaviours** (offence-specific), looking at: the nature and extent of this behaviour; the characteristics of victims; sexual aggression; the range of sexual knowledge, attitudes and interests.
- **Non-Sexual Behaviours**, measuring the following: general criminality that is non-sexual in nature; non-sexual aggression and antisocial behaviour; alcohol and drug uses; general behaviour as well as mental health and wellbeing;
- **Developmental**, looking at influences on these wide-ranging behaviours: trauma and victimisation; childhood and adolescent adversity; attachment; family functioning; health, intellectual and emotional functioning.
- **Environmental/family**, examining the effect of the environment and wider social and family context in which they live: stability and safety; parental or carer supervision; relationships and peer groups; education, employment and leisure.
- **Self-Regulation**, detailing how the individual functions in terms of their abilities to understand the impact of their behaviour and their self-regulation skills: responsibility; motivation and engagement; future perspective; problem solving; social competence. *(Leonard and Hackett, 2019).*

Principles of Working with Children and Young People who have Harmful or Problematic Sexual Behaviour

- Work with children and young people who harm others must recognise that such children are likely to have considerable needs themselves, and also that they may pose a significant risk of harm to other children and young people;
- The needs of the children and young people who sexually harm should be considered separately from the needs of their victims;
- Evidence suggests that children and young people who abuse may have suffered considerable disruption in their lives, been exposed to violence within the family, may have witnessed or been subject to physical or Sexual Abuse, have problems in their educational development and may have committed other offences. Such children and young people are likely to be children in need, and some will in addition be suffering from, or at risk of, Significant Harm and may themselves be in need of protection;
- The reasons why young people sexually abuse are multi-faceted and to explore these further, a full risk assessment and an assessment of need must be carried out in every case;
- Children and young people who sexually harm others should be held responsible for their abusive behaviour;
- Early and effective, intervention with children and young people who sexually harm others may play an important part in protecting children, by preventing the continuation or escalation of abusive behaviour;
- Young people who sexually harm others have a right to be consulted and involved in all matters and decisions that affect their lives. Their parents have a right to information, respect and participation in matters that affect their family;
- The complex nature of the problem requires a co-ordinated, multi-disciplinary approach, which addresses both child protection and criminal justice issues.

Useful Resources

Teaching resources for settings

The **NSPCC** offers helpful teaching resources and lesson plans which can be accessed here:

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection-schools/teaching-resources-lesson-plans>

They include lesson plans, resources and curriculum links for the following topics:

- Our PANTs (the underwear rule) <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/pants-teaching>
- Love Life : Sex and relationships work for young people with learning disabilities <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/love-life>

The films and supporting resources are aimed at young people aged 11 to 25 to help them learn strategies for staying safe as they grow up and gain independence.

- It's not ok: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/its-not-ok>
It's Not OK are teaching resources aimed for young people aged 11+ that include lesson plans, activities and short videos. They reinforce the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships and recognising and responding to behaviour relating to:
 - Online safety
 - Grooming
 - Sexting
 - HSB
 - Child sexual abuse
 - Child sexual exploitation

There are 4 different videos/lesson plans covering a number of different issues.

Books for children and young people

The NSPCC also has helpful booklists for children and young people: early years, primary years, 11-18 years, CYP with additional needs. These recommendations support education settings and parents to initiate conversations with children and young people. The booklists can be found here:

Please select the category of books suitable (age range) and scroll to the bottom of the page.

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection-schools/promoting-healthy-relationships>

Advice/information for worried parents





- www.nspcc.org.uk/harmful-sexual-behaviour
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/sexting-sending-nudes/>
- <https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>

Websites for professionals

- www.aimproject.org.uk

- <https://www.farrer.co.uk/globalassets/news-articles/downloads/peer-on-peer-abuse-toolkit-14.pdf>
- The NSPCC has a wide range of resources on this topic available from their website www.nspcc.org.uk/harmful-sexual-behaviour
There are a series of three podcasts discussing HSB in schools. These can be accessed here:
 - <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/january/podcast-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>
 - <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/january/podcast-assessing-sexualised-behaviour>
 The NSPCC also offers online training for teachers (there is a cost involved)
- Stop It Now – The Lucy Faithfull Foundation



Confidential Helpline: 0808 1000 900    

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<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>

This charity is run by The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, the only UK-wide charity dedicated solely to preventing child sexual abuse. They will support anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse and its prevention including young people themselves, parents and professionals. There is a free helpline for advice and support.

<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/professionals-looking-for-advice/>

They also recognise that working with children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse can have a significant impact on professionals and they offer advice around self-care. <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/professionals-looking-for-advice/professionals-self-care/>

Peer on Peer: HSB and harassment

Guidance on peer on peer harmful behaviour is captured in the KCSIE (2022) Statutory Guidance document

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education—2>

Other References

Ofsted (June 2021) Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

Hackett, S. (2017) Children and Young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Research in practice

Hackett, S. and Smith, S. (2018) Young people who engage in child sexual exploitation behaviours: An exploratory study. Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse

Di McNeish and Sara Scott (2018) Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. DMSS Research
<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/harmful-sexual-behaviour/>

Hollis, V. and Belton, E. (2017) Children and young people who engage in technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour a study of their behaviours, backgrounds and characteristics. NSPCC Evidence Team

Nice Guideline [NG55]: 20 Sept 2016. Harmful sexual behaviour among children and young people. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng55>

Please also refer to the chapter in this toolkit on [Childhood Sexual Exploitation](#)