

# A PROFESSIONALS GUIDE TO SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WHO PRESENT WITH HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR



[www.plymouthscp.co.uk](http://www.plymouthscp.co.uk)



This guide should be considered alongside:

Building Support for Children, Young People and Families in Plymouth which can be found at [www.plymouthscb.co.uk/building-support/](http://www.plymouthscb.co.uk/building-support/)

Your established agency protocols under the South West Safeguarding Child Protection Procedures [www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/](http://www.proceduresonline.com/swcpp/)

This Guide is based on the NICE 2016 Guidance: Harmful Sexual Behaviour among Children and Young People [www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG55](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG55)

## What is Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)?

A large number of sexual offences against children and young people are committed by their peers. (Hackett, S. 2014) Therefore understanding and responding appropriately to harmful sexual behaviour is an important area of practice for all professionals to consider.

Harmful sexual behaviours are “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, S. 2014) ‘Young people’ includes those aged 18-25 with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Healthy developmental sexual activity encompasses those actions, which are to be expected from children and young people as they move from infancy through to adulthood gaining an understanding of their physical, emotional and behavioural relationships. Such sexual activity is characterised by mutual consent and understanding.

It is important to differentiate between sexually abusive behaviour and problematic sexual behaviour which may be harmful to an individual’s development but not to others in order to determine what help will be required.

Problematic sexual behaviour may not include overt victimisation of others but can be developmentally disruptive, cause distress, rejection or increase the victimisation of the children/young people displaying the behaviour.

HSB is characterised by behaviour involving exploitation, coercion, threats or aggression together with secrecy or where a participant relies on an unequal power base. Such a power imbalance means that the victim cannot give informed consent. Power imbalances may be due to age, intellectual ability, status, physical size and /or strength, gender, or race. Harmful sexual behaviour may or may not result in a criminal conviction or prosecution. HSB and problematic sexual behaviours also include online behaviours.

HSB is directed by one child or young person either towards themselves or another. In this regard HSB may be related to and share some common characteristics with child sexual exploitation as peer to peer sexual harm can take place within this context. Nevertheless, this guide is not designed

to provide advice regarding child sexual exploitation or group based sexual violence.

The power of language is always important when working with and supporting children, young people and families. In the case of HSB stigmatising language should be avoided and children and young people should not be referred to as ‘perpetrators’ or ‘sex offenders.’ A more trauma informed phrase to use is ‘children and young people who present with/or display HSB.’

Technology Assisted HSB (TA-HSB) is when children and young people use the internet or other digital technologies to engage in sexual activity that may be harmful to themselves and others. TA-HSB covers a range of behaviours including the developmentally inappropriate use of pornography, online sexual abuse, grooming and sexting. How technology may play a role in harmful sexual behaviours should always be considered.

For information on TA-HSB please go to <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2017/children-young-people-technology-assisted-harmful-sexual-behaviour>

The Aim Project provides a foundation awareness raising course on TA-HSB details of which can be found at <https://aimproject.org.uk/foundation-awareness-of-technology-assisted-harmful-sexual-behaviour-online/>

## How to recognise HSB

Sexual behaviours in children and young people can be seen on a continuum ranging from normal and developmentally appropriate, through inappropriate and problematic, to abusive and violent. A continuum of children and young people's sexual behaviours as developed by Hackett (2010) is illustrated below.

### Normal

.....  
Developmentally expected  
.....

Socially acceptable  
.....

Consensual, mutual, reciprocal  
.....

Shared decision-making

### Inappropriate

.....  
Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour  
.....

.....  
Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group  
.....

.....  
Context for behaviour may be inappropriate  
.....

.....  
Generally consensual and reciprocal

### Problematic

.....  
Problematic and concerning behaviours  
.....

.....  
Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected  
.....

.....  
No overt elements of victimisation  
.....

.....  
Consent issues may be unclear  
.....

.....  
May lack reciprocity or equal power  
.....

.....  
May include levels of compulsivity

### Abusive

.....  
Victimising intent or outcome  
.....

.....  
Includes misuse of power  
.....

.....  
Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance  
.....

Intrusive  
.....

.....  
Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given by victim  
.....

.....  
May include elements of expressive violence

### Violent

.....  
Physically violent sexual abuse  
.....

.....  
Highly intrusive  
.....

.....  
Instrumental violence which is physiologically and / or sexually arousing to the perpetrator  
.....

.....  
Sadism

Adopting a traffic light approach to this continuum means the behaviours can be described as colours. Normal is Green, Inappropriate and Problematic are Amber and Abusive and Violent are Red, as depicted below in the NSPCC guidance tool. (NSPCC 2021) HSB is considered to be abusive and violent i.e. red behaviours.

Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Developmentally expected and socially acceptable</li> <li>■ Consensual, mutual and reciprocal</li> <li>■ Decision making is shared</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Single instances of developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>■ Behaviour that may be socially acceptable within a peer group but not in wider society</li> <li>■ May involve an inappropriate context for behaviour that would otherwise be considered normal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected behaviour</li> <li>■ May be compulsive</li> <li>■ Consent may be unclear and the behaviour may not be reciprocal</li> <li>■ May involve an imbalance of power</li> <li>■ Does not have an overt element of victimisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Intrusive behaviour</li> <li>■ May involve a misuse of power</li> <li>■ May have an element of victimisation</li> <li>■ May use coercion and force</li> <li>■ May include elements of expressive violence</li> <li>■ Informed consent has not been given (or the victim was not able to consent freely)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Physically violent sexual abuse</li> <li>■ Highly intrusive</li> <li>■ May involve instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator</li> <li>■ May involve sadism</li> </ul>

## The Key Principles of What to Do:

- Early and effective intervention with children and young people who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour is an important part in protecting children by preventing the continuation or escalation of abusive behaviour.
- Supporting children who have been sexually harmed by another child is crucial.
- The appropriate agency should carry out an assessment in each case of problematic or harmful sexual behaviour, appreciating that children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour may have unmet developmental needs and may have suffered considerable disruption and adversities including physical, emotional or sexual harm and neglect in their lives.
- Keep accurate, contemporary and detailed records of behaviours and decisions of what happened before, during and after an incident and follow-up on any agreed actions and goals. A good chronology is key.
- Inform parents/carers provided doing so would not cause harm or increase risk for any child or young person. Working 'with' families is an important feature to the approach of supporting children and young people in Plymouth.

Consider the child's age, level of understanding and any known Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). What do the child and family already require help with?

However care should be taken whilst assessing children and young people with SEND needs as there are no known HSB tools proven for use for children and young people with these needs. Shorter sessions and specialist SEND workers should be considered to ensure the most appropriate outcome is achieved.

## What to consider – Normal Sexual Behaviour (Green Behaviours) Getting Advice: Universal Services

Normal sexual behaviour as defined in the continuum is developmentally expected, socially acceptable, consensual, mutual, reciprocal and based on shared decision-making. Universal services should continue to support children and young people by having age appropriate conversations and by helping to access age appropriate information and guidance.

What is considered normal at each developmental stage needs to take into account the social, emotional and cognitive development of the individual child or young person. It is also important to recognise that normal behaviours in young children are concerning if they continue into adolescence and likewise normal behaviours in adolescence would be of concern if observed in younger children.

To help understand what constitutes normal sexual behaviour Appendix I provides the NSPCCs stages of typical sexual development and behaviour in children.

## What to consider – Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour (Amber Behaviours) Getting Help: Early Help

For inappropriate sexual behaviour consider whether an Early Help Assessment Tool (EHAT) could help meet the child's needs. The benefits of an EHAT should be explained carefully with care being taken not to stigmatise children who display inappropriate sexual behaviour throughout the EHAT process.

Many children presenting with inappropriate sexual behaviour will stop this behaviour of their own accord, whilst for others more intensive support is necessary. Therefore, it is essential that concerns regarding inappropriate sexual behaviour are properly assessed, support provided and reviewed until evidenced that the risk has been adequately reduced. This includes seeking advice from your agency safeguarding lead.

In most situations, children and young people with inappropriate sexual behaviour will not require help from specialist services which are for problematic, abusive and violent sexual behaviours. However, children and young people may still need ongoing advice and support from agencies.

## **What to consider – Problematic Sexual Behaviour (Amber Behaviours) Getting More Help: Targeted Support**

Problematic sexual behaviours are developmentally unusual and socially unexpected. Whilst there may be no overt features of victimisation, consent issues may be unclear; there may be a power imbalance and a compulsiveness to the behaviour.

For problematic amber behaviours, professionals should seek advice from your agency safeguarding lead. This should include consideration of getting more help on a targeted support basis.

## **What to consider – Abusive and Violent Sexual Behaviour (Red Behaviours) Getting Risk Support: Statutory Services**

Where there are concerns regarding abusive and violent sexual behaviour professionals should discuss with their agency safeguarding lead. These incidents typically require a Contact be made with Plymouth's Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). In Plymouth, this is done via The Gateway.

Throughout, professionals should:

- Adopt a child-centred approach (listen to and consider child's wishes and feelings and act in child's best long-term interests);
- Consider child development including sexual development;
- Consider context of behaviour;
- Always consider whether any sexual behaviour has been consensual in the context of power relationship/imbalance and exploitation;
- Recognise that problematic, abusive and violent sexualised behaviour is often an expression of a range of problems or underlying vulnerabilities (consider family / social factors/ privacy and boundaries within the home);
- Look out for patterns of behaviour and the reasons behind it (including use of social media);
- Try and gain an overview of the child's situation;
- Focus on each individual child's behaviour;
- Consider each child's needs, the risk to each child (including their

networks) and the risk they pose to others - include a safety plan if necessary;

- Ensure a safety plan is in place whilst awaiting an assessment and that parents/carers have a clear understanding of it.
- In addition to safeguarding plans, report any recent sexual offence immediately to the police as there may be urgent forensic evidence to consider.

## **Statutory Children's Social Care Single Assessment**

When the local authority children's social care service becomes involved, a comprehensive assessment of the child or young person's family and social context is required. Any information that professionals have already gained in relation to the child or young person and their family situation should be collated for assessment.

This assessment should include details of the child or young person's:

- Home/place where they live arrangements
- Developmental stage, gender, learning ability, culture and religion;
- Social background, past care and any trauma they may have experienced;
- Social Relationships;
- Sex and relationship education and their responses to this;
- The description of the HSB and their understanding of this behaviour;
- Engagement and any denial of the HSB;
- Emotional development including empathy and self-regulation;
- Victimisation;
- Patterns of behaviour and the reasons behind it (including use of on-line and social media activity)
- Analysis and recommendations should include the following to minimise the risk to the child/young person and others:
- A safety plan including how the child/young person can make good choices





## Specialist HSB Assessment and Support

In situations of problematic, abusive and violent sexual behaviour specialist assessment and support should be considered; for example Aim 3 Assessment and Intervention Model depending on age, gender, special educational need, disability and mental health needs of the child/young person. These assessments and interventions are for use by specially trained workers.

## Victims: Children who have suffered or are likely to suffer significant harm as a result of harmful sexual behaviour

It is essential that South West Child Protection Procedures [www.online-procedures.co.uk/swcpp/](http://www.online-procedures.co.uk/swcpp/) are followed for any child who is at significant risk of /or has suffered harmful sexual behaviour. Professionals should consult with their agency safeguarding lead with such incidents typically requiring a Contact to be made with Plymouth's Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) via The Gateway.

Therefore, it is important to consider the impact of harmful sexual behaviour on any children involved. Once any necessary safeguarding has taken place, any support that is assessed as required for the child and family must be provided. Contact with the family/carers must be made to discuss what support is available with details of any recommended interventions and any barriers to accessing this. Flexibility allowing successful intervention to take place is important.

## The Adolescent Safety Framework

Plymouth's Adolescent Safety Framework (ASF) is a way of supporting older children and young people experiencing harm outside the home. The ASF can support professionals to consider the wider contextual safeguarding issues that may be taking place for children and young people presenting with inappropriate, problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. Professionals should consider completing a 'Safer Me' assessment to assist their thinking. For further information and detailed guidance on the Adolescent Safety Framework and Safer Me Assessment please go to [www.plymouthscb.co.uk/asf/](http://www.plymouthscb.co.uk/asf/)

## Practice Tools, Learning and Support

### Brook Traffic Light Tool

The Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool supports professionals to identify, understand and respond appropriately to sexual behaviours, including harmful sexual behaviours, across 5 age groups ranging from 0-18. To access the Traffic Light Tool professionals must complete Traffic Light training. This is to ensure safe use of the Tool. If you have completed the training and have access to the Tool please complete it to assist you in your work. For more information on the Tool including training in its use please go to [www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/](http://www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/)

### South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL)

In June 2021 Ofsted concluded that the prevalence of child-on-child sexual harassment and abuse was so widespread that, for some, incidents are 'so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them' and 'consider them normal'. SWGfL and The Marie Collins Foundation has created a support service for professionals working with children and young people in tackling harmful sexual behaviours, funded by the Home Office and in collaboration with the Department for Education. Available help includes advice on individual cases, guidance on policy development to tackle harmful sexual behaviour and access to best practice resources. To find out more please go to <https://swgfl.org.uk/harmful-sexual-behaviour-support-service/>

### Research in Practice

Research in Practice brings together academic research, practice expertise and the experiences of people accessing services to develop a range of learning resources. For their content on harmful sexual behaviour please go to [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/topics/harmful-sexual-behaviour/](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/topics/harmful-sexual-behaviour/)

### NSPCC

The NSPCC has an expertise developing learning on the topic of child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour. They have brought together a host of materials on the topic of harmful sexual behaviour including podcasts, research

briefings, case review learning, statistics and guides on identifying healthy and harmful sexual behaviour. To access these please go to

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour>

## Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse

The Centre aims to reduce the impact of sexual abuse through improved prevention and responses. Funded by the Home Office and hosted by Barnardo's it works to bring about change by developing new approaches and applying learning into practice. It's wealth of information and resources includes harmful sexual behaviour of all which can be found at <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/harmful-sexual-behaviour/>

## Stop it Now

Stop It Now! UK and Ireland was established in 2002 by The Lucy Faithfull Foundation.

Stop it Now! provides information and support for professionals and families and has a dedicated section to understanding harmful sexual behaviour that provides useful information on identifying harmful sexual behaviour and the impact of technology.

For more information please visit <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/concerned-about-a-child-or-young-persons-sexual-behaviour/>

## The Aim Project

The Aim Project (AIM) has specialist expertise in the field of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. Aim provides a comprehensive suite of practice models and assessments for use by specially trained staff. It also provides resources for all professionals including podcasts, information sheets, presentations and practice tools. To see their the full range of support, training and learning please go to <https://aimproject.org.uk/portfolio-item/online-resources/>

## Local Services and Initiatives

NSPCC offer the following services regarding HSB: Together for Childhood is a place-based approach to prevent sexual abuse. The project combines NSPCC and local resources and expertise to prevent sexual abuse by raising awareness, sharing resources and learning on what works and developing new approaches to prevent sexual harm in partnership with children, young people and the community.

There is a dedicated consultation service for professionals regarding children and young people where there are concerns about inappropriate, problematic or harmful sexual behaviour.

In partnership with the local authority NSPCC contribute to a specialist support offer for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour. This includes risk assessment and on-going support. For more information contact 01752 422577 email [plymouth.servicecentre@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:plymouth.servicecentre@nspcc.org.uk)

**The Youth Justice Service** offer the following services regarding HSB The Youth Justice Service receive referrals from the court and police where an offence has been committed and offer specialist assessment and on-going support. This includes a range of initiatives and access to a specialist seconded network of professionals. For more information contact [yosadmin@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:yosadmin@plymouth.gov.uk)

**Plymouth City Council Targeted Support Service** offer specialist support for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour. This includes risk assessment and on-going support. For more information please contact us at [targetedsupport@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:targetedsupport@plymouth.gov.uk)

**Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: (CAMHS)** CAMHS may be involved in cases of HSB where there are significant mental health concerns.

**Plymouth Online Directory (POD)** Please refer to the POD for regular updates of what is available. [www.plymouthonlinedirectory.com](http://www.plymouthonlinedirectory.com)

**MASH** Accessed Via The Gateway Tel: 01752 668000 Email: [gateway@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:gateway@plymouth.gov.uk)

# Appendix I NSPCC Guide to Understanding Sexual Development and Behaviour in Children

## Under 5

At this stage, it's common to notice natural exploratory behaviour emerging when children feel safe and comfortable. This includes:

- having no inhibitions about nudity (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- touching their own private parts (NCTSN, 2009; National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence (SECASA), 2017; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- showing curiosity about other people's private parts or naked bodies (Healthy Children, 2019; NCTSN, 2009; National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2020; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- talking about bodily functions, using words like 'poo' and 'wee' (NCTSN, 2009; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- consensually role playing with their peers, exploring different relationships or roles such as 'playing house', 'playing mummies and daddies' or 'playing doctor' (Government of Canada, 2012; National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; Virtual Lab School, 2021).

Very young children can have erections, beginning from birth (Virtual Lab School, 2021).

It is uncommon for younger children to discuss specific sexual acts, use explicit sexual language or have adult-like sexual contact with other people (Stop It Now, 2007).

## 5 to 9 year-olds

As children get a little older, it's common to see them displaying behaviour like:

- becoming more modest and asking for privacy (Government of Canada, 2012; SECASA, 2017; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- asking questions about sex and relationships, such as what sex is, where babies come from and same-sex relationships (Government of Canada, 2012; NCTSN, 2009; Stop It Now, 2007; Stop It Now, 2020; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- consensually exploring relationships with peers, for example mimicking adult relationships by holding hands with a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' or giving them a kiss on the cheek (NCTSN, 2009; SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007).

As children become more aware of social norms and 'rules' around sexualised behaviour, it's common for them to test boundaries. This might include using 'naughty' words they've heard from other people (NCTSN, 2009).

It's uncommon for children aged 5-8 to have adult-like sexual interactions, discuss specific sexual acts or self-stimulate in public (Stop It Now, 2007).

## 9 to 13 year-olds

During these ages, children begin to get more curious about sex and relationships. They may start to be attracted to other people. Examples of typical sexual behaviour during this stage are:

- having or wanting to have a romantic relationship with peers (of the same or different gender) (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- using sexual language, making jokes about sex or discussing sexual acts with peers (SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- wanting more privacy (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; NCTSN, 2009; SECASA, 2017; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- looking for information about sex in books, online or in the media (this might lead to accidentally finding sexual pictures or videos) (Government of Canada, 2012; National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; NCTSN, 2009; Stop It Now, 2007; Virtual Lab School, 2021)
- masturbating in private (National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, 2013; NCTSN, 2009; SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007; Stop It Now, 2020; Virtual Lab School, 2021).

It's uncommon for children in this age group to display sexual behaviour in a public place, or regularly display adult-like sexual behaviour such as having oral or genital contact or intercourse (Stop It Now, 2007; 2020)

## 13 to 17 year-olds

During adolescence, sexual behaviour becomes more private and young people begin to explore their sexual identity. You might notice them:

- experimenting sexually and consensually with the same age group (SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007; Stop It Now, 2020)
- looking for information about sex and sexual relationships (Stop It Now, 2007; 2020)
- masturbating in private (SECASA, 2017; Stop It Now, 2007; Stop It Now, 2020).

The age of consent to engage in sexual activity in the UK is 16-years-old. However the law is there to protect children and young people from abuse or exploitation, rather than to prosecute under-16s who participate in mutually consenting sexual activity. It is uncommon for adolescents to masturbate in public, or display sexual attraction towards a much younger child (Stop It Now, 2007; 2020)



Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership  
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