



Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour

To be read in conjunction with the All Wales Practice Guide on Safeguarding Children where there are concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour and the Wales Safeguarding Procedures

With thanks to education, safeguarding and research professionals who have informed this work.



In partnership with





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Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for professionals working with children (up to the age of 18) in an education setting.

This includes those working in early years, maintained and independent schools, and further education colleges.

What is this guidance for?

All children have a right to be safe from abuse (Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and have a right to an education (Article 28 of the UNCRC).

Safeguarding children is a responsibility shared by everyone in contact with children and young people.

This guidance provides education settings with practical tools to prevent and respond to instances of peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour taking place both inside and out of the settings. This includes digital abuse and exploitation.

Education settings should use this guidance to put in place clear policies to prevent and respond to instances of peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour, so that all children who attend their setting can realise their right to be safe and their right to an education.



Key definitions and guidance

Sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening, including: physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts; non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways.

Child Sexual Abuse is an umbrella term and includes Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

Source: National Action Plan on Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse, Welsh Government, 2019

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Is a form of sexual abuse that can include sex or any form of sexual activity with a child; the production of indecent images and/or any other indecent material involving children

Involves a child. It occurs to those up to the age of 18 years old.

Involves some form of exchange. The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something; such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to or instead of the child who is exploited. Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchange. Children may feel that they have given consent.

Source: All Wales Practice Guide: Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation, Wales Safeguarding Procedures

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB) can be defined as: sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. This definition of HSB includes both contact and non-contact behaviours (grooming, exhibitionism, voyeurism and sexting or recording images of sexual acts via smart phones or social media applications).

Source: Practice guidance on Harmful Sexual Behaviour, Wales Safeguarding Procedures

Sexual harassment

In the context of this guidance, sexual harassment is defined as: *“persistent unwanted conduct of a sexual nature by a child towards another child that can occur online and offline. Sexual harassment is likely to: violate a child’s dignity, and/or make them feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated and/or create a hostile, offensive or sexualised environment.”*

Source: Department for Education, UK Government: Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges: Advice for governing bodies, proprietors, headteachers, principals, senior leadership teams and designated safeguarding leads.

Useful guidance

Professionals in education settings will want to refer to the following relevant existing guidance:

[Practice guide on Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation, Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#)

[Practice guide on Safeguarding Children where there are concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour, Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#)

[Practice guide on Safeguarding Children from Online Abuse, Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#)

[Keeping Learners Safe](#)

[Welsh Government Online Safety Action Plan](#)

[UKCIS sexting guidance](#)

[Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#)

[Welsh Government statutory guidance on CSE \(to be published shortly\)](#)

Chapter 1: Scope of the guidance

This guidance is intended to help education settings prevent and address instances of peer sexual abuse and exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour.

Sexual abuse can happen between children of any age and sex, and takes many forms along a continuum ranging from sexual harassment through to contact sexual abuse, including peer sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour. Peer sexual abuse involves children of similar ages/year groups whereas other types of harmful sexual behaviour will involve a large difference in age.

Increasingly, peer sexual abuse is taking place through digital platforms, which makes it more complex for education settings to tackle.

This chapter sets out the continuum of behaviours which constitute peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour. It is important that education settings respond to all behaviours in a proportionate way, starting by embedding a whole school approach to creating healthy, respectful relationships between peers and implementing appropriate safeguarding and child protection procedures if required.



Children's sexual behaviour

Children's sexual behaviour exists on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. Professionals working with children in an education setting require understanding of this continuum of behaviours to ensure appropriate intervention.

Hackett (2010)¹ has proposed a continuum model to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours presented by children and young people which should help professionals identify which behaviours are potentially harmful and which represent healthy sexual development.

This guidance uses the continuum model to put some of the behaviours education settings will encounter into context below. This includes online behaviours.

Behaviours falling under the inappropriate and problematic category will not necessarily need to be referred to social services: instead, young people may benefit from school based early intervention strategies (see chapter 4 on responding to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour). Behaviours falling under the abusive and violent category will need to be referred to social services by the Designated Safeguarding Person.

Education settings may also find the Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool² helpful in identifying sexual behaviours within certain age categories. The Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light tool provides guidance that is age and developmentally appropriate, positive and protective. The tool uses the categories of green, orange and red light to help adults identify, understand and respond to children and young people's sexual behaviours by age range; 0-4, 5-7, 8-12, 13-15 and 16-18. The tool can be used by a wide range of professionals including schools, early childhood education and care centres, health professionals, social workers, psychologists and may also be used by families.

Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
• Developmentally expected • Socially acceptable • Consensual, mutual, reciprocal • Shared decision making	• Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour • Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group • Context for behaviour may be inappropriate • Generally consensual and reciprocal	• 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	• 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	• Physically violent sexual abuse • Highly intrusive • Instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator • Sadism

¹ Hackett, S (2010). Children, young people and sexual violence. In Barter C and Berridge, D (eds) *Children behaving badly? Exploring peer violence between children and young people*, London: Blackwell Wiley.

² <https://www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>

Sexual harassment

Education professionals may encounter reports of the following behaviours inside/outside their settings:

- sexual comments, such as: telling sexual stories, making lewd comments, making sexual remarks about clothes and appearance and calling someone sexualised names;
- sexual ‘jokes’ or taunting;
- physical behaviour, such as: entering cubicles in school toilets, deliberately brushing against someone, interfering with someone’s clothes (schools and colleges should be considering when any of this crosses a line into sexual violence - it is important to talk to and consider the experience of the victim) and displaying pictures, videos, photos or drawings of a sexual nature.

When considering incidents of this nature, it is important to identify **if the behaviour is isolated or forms part of a recurring pattern**. While isolated incidents could be qualified as inappropriate behaviour, a recurring pattern of sexual harassment could be an indicator of problematic behaviour as per the Hackett continuum.

In the context of this guidance, sexual harassment is defined as ‘persistent unwanted conduct of a sexual nature’ by a child towards another child that can occur online and offline. Sexual harassment is likely to: violate a child’s dignity, and/or make them feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated and/or create a hostile, offensive or sexualised environment.

It is important that schools and colleges consider sexual harassment in broad terms. Sexual harassment (as set out above) creates an atmosphere that, if not challenged, can normalise inappropriate behaviours and provide an environment that may lead to sexual violence. Research³ has found that staff and students can create or reinforce norms that underpin harmful sexual behaviours and in doing so “create contexts conducive with peer-sexual abuse, including victim-blaming.”

Education settings should also consider and address staff’s unconscious bias.

Professor Jessica Ringrose has recently worked with Sexplain to develop guidance for schools in England in relation to sexual harassment, which education settings may find helpful to refer to.⁴

Digital sexual abuse and harassment

Young people increasingly experience abuse and exploitation online and/or digitally. This will be more difficult for education settings to identify, as some of it is likely to occur outside schools and colleges. However, it is important to consider the impact of this on young people’s offline lives.

A proportion of sexual harassment described in the previous section will happen online and/or digitally. This may be standalone, or part of a wider pattern of sexual harassment and/or sexual violence. It may include:

- non-consensual sharing of sexual images and videos. The UK Council for Internet Safety (UKCIS) has produced [detailed advice for schools and colleges on this](#).
- sexualised online bullying;
- unwanted sexual comments and messages, including, on social media; and
- coercion and threats.

³ Carlene Firmin (2019): *School rules of (sexual) engagement: government, staff and student contributions to the norms of peer sexual-abuse in seven UK schools*, Journal of Sexual Aggression.

⁴ <https://sexplain.org.uk/guidance-for-schools?fbclid=IwAR0rPcCTLIIdlluaTKjVv5GBTpddMIYGgWwXNXR0t6wpqoCoFUxejMqSvWLI>

Chapter 2:

Duties and responsibilities of education settings

2.1 General duties

Schools and colleges have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children at their school/college.⁵

In Wales section 130 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 places a duty on education professionals to report a child at risk if they have reasonable cause to suspect the child is at risk. A child at risk is defined as a child at risk of or experiencing abuse, neglect or other kinds of harm, and has needs for care and support.

Education settings should have regard to the following statutory and practice guidance: Keeping Learners Safe Working Together to Safeguard People volume 5: Handling Individual Cases to Protect Children at Risk, and the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.⁶

2.2 Human rights and equality duties

Education settings should be aware of their obligations under the Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA). It is unlawful for education settings to act in a way that is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. These rights include:

- Article 3: the right to freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment (an absolute right);
- Article 8: the right to respect for private and family life (a qualified right) includes a duty to protect individuals' physical and psychological integrity;
- Article 14: requires that all of the rights and freedoms set out in the Act must be protected and applied without discrimination;
- Protocol 1, Article 2: protects the right to an effective education. Being subjected to sexual violence or sexual harassment may breach any or all of these rights, depending on the nature of the conduct and the circumstances.

⁵ Section 175 of the Education Act 2002 requires governing bodies of maintained schools and colleges, in relation to their functions relating to the conduct of the school or the institution to make arrangements for ensuring that such functions are exercised with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children who are either pupils at the school or receiving education or training at the institution

⁶ See <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/working-together-to-safeguard-people-volume-5-handling-individual-cases-to-protect-children-at-risk.pdf> and <https://safeguarding.wales/>

Education settings are required to comply with relevant requirements as set out in the Equality Act 2010 (the Equality Act).⁷

- According to the Equality Act, education settings must not unlawfully discriminate against pupils because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief, gender reassignment, pregnancy or sexual orientation (protected characteristics).
- Whilst all of the above protections are important, in the context of this guidance education settings should carefully consider how they are supporting their pupils with regard to their sex and sexuality.
- Provisions within the Equality Act allow education settings to take positive action, where it can be shown that it is proportionate, to deal with particular disadvantages affecting one group. A school or college, could, for example, consider taking positive action to support girls if there was evidence they were being disproportionately subjected to sexual violence or sexual harassment.



⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

Chapter 3:

A whole school approach to preventing and responding to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour

3.1 Key principles for preventing and responding to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour

When designing strategies and policies to prevent and respond to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour, education settings should implement the following principles:

Support for all children

Practitioners should adopt a Children's rights approach and follow the National Participation Standards.

All children should be supported to remain in education where it is safe to do so for themselves and others.

Children who engage in peer sexual abuse, exploitation and display harmful sexual behaviour within education settings must be considered as children first and their care and support needs considered in the same way as any other child. It is important that children are not stigmatised as a result of their behaviour. Article 2 of the UNCRC on non-discrimination is one of four key articles representing the 'guiding principles' of working within a children's rights framework.

It is important to remember that both boys and girls can display harmful sexual behaviour. Evidence suggests that welfare responses tend to be given to girls, whereas boys' harmful sexual behaviour is seen as a criminal justice issue.⁸

Children who have experienced peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour should be supported to speak out, listened to and able to access the help they need, both in and out of education settings. Based on consultation with a wide range of professionals, the NSPCC has put together tips for professionals on how to engage sensitively and effectively with a child in the moment of a disclosure.⁹

⁸ S. Wareham and W. Steer (2015) *Girls Talk: Supporting Girls to Develop Healthy Sexual Relationships*, Cardiff: Barnardo's Cymru and Boys 2
<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/resources-help-identify-and-engage-young-people-risk-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation>

⁹ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/let-children-know-you-re-listening>

A whole school approach

Respectful relationships, well-being and safeguarding should be at the heart of education settings' ethos and touch upon all aspects of education settings' life.

Early intervention will also be key to successful prevention and response to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour. In particular, education settings should promote a culture where sexual bullying and harassment, digital and off line, is never tolerated and dismissed as 'banter': *"Whole school approaches emphasise the need for prevention that includes multiple activities within schools and targets multiple stakeholders, including pupils, staff and parents."*¹⁰ A whole school policy to prevent and address peer abuse should, in the first instance, be agreed and promoted by the School Senior Leadership team and School Governing Body.¹¹ Questions to help schools identify the key issues their own policy and approach will need to address are available in the Farrer& Co Peer -on -peer abuse toolkit.¹²

It is also important to promote a culture where speaking out about abuse is encouraged and supported, as research identifies fear of being labelled as a 'snitch' as a key barrier for disclosure within education settings.¹³ This should be tackled through curriculum focussed on addressing this particular issue.

Promoting healthy relationships should be done by involving learners in shaping the culture and ethos of the school. In Wales, the Agenda and Primary Agenda toolkits¹⁴ have been created to enable young people to make positive relationships matter in schools and other settings.

Engaging parents

Consultation undertaken by NSPCC Cymru/ Wales and Barnardo's Cymru in 2018 found that parents of children who display harmful sexual behaviour felt ill equipped and ill-informed to address their children's behaviour. The Keeping Learners Safe guidance states that professionals should discuss any welfare concerns with the family and if possible work in agreement with them to make a referral to social service. However, this should not put the child at increased risk of harm. It is also important to seek and consider the child's views on whether family should be informed, especially if the child is mature enough to make an informed judgment.

The support of parents and carers is extremely helpful in promoting engagement and successful outcomes. It is important that education settings engage with all parents at an early stage so that they are part of the response. Parents should be kept informed of education settings' response and next steps at all times.

Consultation undertaken by NSPCC Cymru/ Wales and Barnardo's Cymru in 2018 found that parents of children who display harmful sexual behaviour felt ill equipped and ill-informed to address their children's behaviour. These were parents of children who had received a referral for a care and support assessment. However consideration should be given to how parents respond to the issues at the 'inappropriate' and 'problematic' levels of Hackett's continuum also and signposting to support available if required.

10 Jenny Lloyd, *Response and interventions into harmful sexual behaviour in schools*, Child Abuse and Neglect 94 (2019)

11 Welsh Government, Keeping Learners Safe. Available at: <https://gov.wales/keeping-learners-safe>

12 <https://www.farrer.co.uk/globalassets/clients-and-sectors/safeguarding/farrer--co-safeguarding-peer-on-peer-abuse-toolkit-2019.pdf>

13 <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Briefing-final-Beyond-Referrals.pdf>

14 See <http://agenda.wales/>

Contextual safeguarding

As well as engaging parents, it is important for education settings to understand and engage with elements of the external context which have an impact on shaping children's sexual behaviour. Contextual safeguarding is described as: *"an approach to understanding, and responding to, the risk of harm to which children can be exposed, and/or harm which they can experience, beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that children form in their neighbourhoods, schools, and online can feature violence, coercive control, and abuse."*¹⁵

Multi agency approach

An effective response to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour within education settings should be seen in the wider context of a multi-agency approach. Education settings are key partners within this.

The University of Bedfordshire, Contextual Safeguarding Network and NSPCC have developed a helpful toolkit, Beyond Referrals, which gives further details about the key features of an effective multi agency approach to preventing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour.¹⁶ The toolkit refers to four key elements of a multi agency approach, with several levers in each element.

The key features of a successful multi agency approach in responding to peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour are outlined below:

RESPONSE AND INTERVENTION (5)				
THEME	DESCRIPTION	GREEN	AMBER	RED
HSB resource	HSB resource in partnership	- Regardless of criminal investigation: - The MA partnership has invested in specialist HSB interventions and/or clinical teams capable of delivering assessments and interventions. - Youth service provision exists and has been equipped to support young people associated with HSB incidents where appropriate. - Wider services within the partnerships, policing, health and youth offending service work to shared objectives when managing cases of HSB in schools.	Regardless of criminal investigation, wider services within the partnerships; policing, health and youth offending service, work to shared objectives when managing cases of HSB in schools.	The response to HSB incidents by schools are largely determined by criminal investigations.
Dissemination of intervention	Dissemination of HSB intervention	- Steps taken by the MA partnership to prevent or intervene with incidents of HSB are clearly communicated to local schools. - Schools are aware of success within the MA partnership in responding to HSB and related incidents.	Steps taken by the MA partnership to prevent or intervene with incidents of HSB are communicated to some schools largely via MA or case management meetings.	Schools are unaware of success within the MA partnership in responding to HSB.
Relationship with schools	MA partnership relationships with schools	- MA partnership draws upon KCSIE, and commits resources, in order to facilitate positive relationships with all education providers within their geographical area to support schools in their response to HSB. - The MA partnership persists to identify solutions when encountering challenges in accessing and building relationships with individual schools in response to HSB.	MA partnership draws upon KCSIE, and commits resources, in order to facilitate positive relationships with all education providers within their geographical area in their response to HSB.	- The MA partnership has limited resources in which to support schools in their response to HSB. These resources are used when schools request them. - The MA partnership has accepted that relationships are only possible with schools who are open to their engagement.
Response to trends	Response to identified trends following an incident of HSB	Following incidents of HSB within schools, the MA partnership identifies opportunities to develop preventative or de-escalatory interventions to associated young people e.g. via social work or health services, neighbourhood policing, or with young people currently on orders to the Youth Offending Service.	Following incidents of HSB within schools, the MA partnership addresses the incident of concern and those who are directly affected as well as those who may be impacted by the incident. For example where threats of retaliation or similar concerns arise which could affect students and their families.	Following incidents of HSB within schools, the MA partnership focuses its response on addressing the incident of concern and those directly affected.
Thresholds	Understanding and/or application of thresholds associated to HSB	- The MA partnership works with schools to ensure a shared understanding of HSB thresholds. HSB thresholds used in the partnership have been shared with, and adopted by, schools. - There are a range of responses within the MA partnership that fall across the continuum of HSB that schools can draw upon in order to address cases of HSB that are escalating.	School's understanding of HSB thresholds are consistent with the local partnership's understanding of HSB thresholds.	- There is evidence of inconsistent application of HSB thresholds by staff within the MA partnership. - The MA partnership responds to cases of contact HSB. There is not sufficient evidence of the MA partnership's response to cases of non-contact HSB.

15 Farrer & Co Peer on Peer Abuse Toolkit, 2019, p.2

16 <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/publications/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>

3.2. Decision making and response

Role of the Designated Safeguarding Person (DSP)

It is the responsibility of the DSP to ensure school policies for safeguarding and other policies which have relevance are up to date and are being effectively implemented. This is outlined in more detail in Keeping Learners Safe.

Research¹⁷ has highlighted the benefits of adequately staffed and resourced DSP provision, with schools able to provide a consistent response to HSB, which was integrated within wider safeguarding structures, aligned to the wider local multi-agency partnership response, and which considered the school's response in the context of current and emerging concerns related to HSB. It also provided schools with an opportunity to develop staff knowledge on HSB and related issues and build capacity in identifying harm, managing disclosures and supporting students.

Assessment: What is sexually appropriate behaviour?

Providing a measured, appropriate and effective response to behaviour, which appears to be sexually inappropriate, begins with a clear understanding of what is appropriate and acceptable within the given age and stage of development. There are a number of sources of information on children and young people's sexual development, and the behaviour that can be expected at each stage of development. The Brooks Traffic Light Tool, already referred to in Chapter 1, is a good example

<https://www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>

Development is affected by a number of factors including the child or young person's age, experience of care, peer group and individual disposition.

- A lack of basic nurturing can lead to psychological, emotional and physical delay. It may also drive high levels of self-reliance which may appear in behaviour more usually seen in an older child or young person.
- Experiences of abuse and maltreatment often lead to high levels of stress, problems concentrating, regulating emotions and relating to others.
- Individual responses will vary, with some children being more, or less, affected by such circumstances and experiences than others.
- Children and young people with additional learning needs may have cognitive challenges which mean they find relating to others more difficult.
- Older children and young people's behaviour is influenced by their peers. There is evidence that adolescents and young people exhibit more risk-taking behaviour when they are with their peers than when they are alone.
- Sexualised behaviour in younger children needs to be understood as distinct from that of older children and adults. Pre-pubescent children do not understand sex and do not experience sexual arousal in the same way as adolescent children and adults.

An individual, child centred perspective on the behaviour, and the context in which it occurred, will need to be considered for each of the children or young people involved in the incidents(s), with the above in mind.

Hackett's Sexual Behaviour Continuum model referred to in Chapter 1 of this guidance can be used to understand the behaviour and inform responses to it.

¹⁷ <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Final-Briefing-final-Beyond-Referrals.pdf>

Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
Developmentally expected	Single instances of inappropriate behaviour	Problematic and concerning behaviours	Victimising intent or outcome	Physically violent sexual abuse
Socially acceptable			Includes misuse of power	Highly intrusive
Consensual, mutual, reciprocal	Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group	Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected	Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance	Instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator
Shared decision making	Context for behaviour may be inappropriate	No overt elements of victimisation	Intrusive	Sadism
	Generally consensual and reciprocal	Consent issues may be unclear	Informed consent lacking, or not able to be freely by victim	
		May lack reciprocity or equal power	May include elements of expressive violence	
		May include levels of compulsivity		

When considering an incident of sexual behaviour within their setting, it is important for education professionals to look at the context surrounding the incident and not just the facts. This will help determine where the behaviour sits on the Hackett continuum and which response is appropriate.

Chaffin, Letourneau and Silovsky (2002, p208) suggest a child's sexual behaviour should be considered abnormal if it:

- occurs at a frequency greater than would be developmentally expected
- interferes with the child's development
- occurs with coercion, intimidation, or force
- is associated with emotional distress
- occurs between children of divergent ages or developmental abilities
- repeatedly recurs in secrecy after intervention by caregivers

The following questions can be used to assess where on the continuum the behaviour lies:

- Was the behaviour developmentally appropriate?
- Was the behaviour developmentally understandable for this child?
- What was the context?
- Was this an isolated incident?
- Who else was involved and how did they view the behaviour?
- Were there attempts at secrecy?
- Were there any other factors involved e.g aggression?

Case study 1: Identifying sexual behaviour in primary school children. (Source: Barnardo's Cymru)

Defining the context

Adam is 7 years old. He and another boy have been showing their penises to one another in the school toilets. The behaviour was disclosed by the other boy, who had complained.

- Was the behaviour developmentally appropriate?
- Was the behaviour developmentally understandable for this child?
- What was the context?
- Was this an isolated incident?
- Who else was involved and how did they view their behaviour?
- Were there attempts at secrecy?
- Were there any other factors involved e.g aggression?

New information and further questions

The other boy involved was 2 years younger than Adam. The boy disclosed to his father the night after it had happened and was upset about it. The boy told his father that Adam had asked him to “*kiss his willy*” on a few previous occasions.

Conclusion

This incident could have been dismissed as ‘kids being kids’. Through asking further questions to establish the context of the behaviour, it has now been established that Adam is exposing himself to a younger child and persistently asking for sexual contact. This behaviour can be described as problematic as per the Hackett continuum.

What next? Responding to incidents of peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour.

The table below was developed for health practitioners. However, education settings may find it helpful to inform their response to children who display sexualised behaviour and references to the DSP for health should be taken as the school DSP.

Responding to children who display sexualised behaviour

It's important for health practitioners to be able to distinguish normal sexual behaviours from those that may be harmful, and make sure children get appropriate support. Use this guide alongside the resources at nspcc.org.uk/hsbhealth to help you respond in the right way.

Need advice?
Contact our helpline for advice and support:
➤ Call **0800 800 5000**
➤ Email help@nspcc.org.uk
➤ Visit nspcc.org.uk/helpline

Childline
For children who need further support our free, confidential helpline is available 24/7:
➤ Call **0800 1111**
➤ Visit childline.org.uk

Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
• Developmentally expected and socially acceptable behaviour • Consensual, mutual and reciprocal • Decision making is shared	• Single instances of developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour • Behaviour that is socially acceptable within a peer group • Generally consensual and reciprocal • May involve an inappropriate context for behaviour that would otherwise be considered normal	• Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected behaviour • May be compulsive • Consent may be unclear and the behaviour may not be reciprocal • May involve an imbalance of power • Doesn't have an overt element of victimisation	• Intrusive behaviour • May involve a misuse of power • May have an element of victimisation • May use coercion and force • May include elements of expressive violence • Informed consent has not been given (or the victim was not able to consent freely)	• Physically violent sexual abuse • Highly intrusive • May involve instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator • May involve sadism
How to respond • Although green behaviours are not concerning, they still require a response • Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally • Talk to parents about developmentally typical sexualised behaviours • Explain how parents can positively reinforce messages about appropriate sexual behaviour and act to keep their children safe from abuse • Signpost helpful resources such as our PANTS activity pack: nspcc.org.uk/pants • Make sure young people know how to behave responsibly and safely	How to respond • Amber behaviours should not be ignored • Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally • Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection • Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a designated health safeguarding lead who can be notified and will provide support • Consider whether the child or young person needs therapeutic support and make referrals as appropriate	How to respond • Red behaviours indicate a need for immediate intervention and action • If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999 • Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection • Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a designated health safeguarding lead who should be notified and will provide support • Refer the child or young person for therapeutic support		

NSPCC
Learning

In partnership with
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The NSPCC HSB Framework¹⁸ also gives the following breakdown of responses

A continuum of HSB assessment (from Hackett, 2019)

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic	Abusive	Violent
Key behavioural elements	• Developmentally accepted • Consensual	• Consensual and reciprocal • Accepted in peer group • Context may be inappropriate	• Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected • No overt elements of victimisation. • Consent may be unclear	• Victimising intent or outcome. Misuse of power • Lack of consent	• Highly intrusive • Physically violent sexual abuse
Assessment levels indicated	• Screening	• Screening • Brief assessment. • NICE Early help assessment	• NICE Early help assessment • Brief/ comprehensive assessment	• Comprehensive assessment • HSB focused risk assessment	• HSB focused risk assessment. Specialist assessment
Possible frameworks and tools	• Sexual behaviours are normative, therefore HSB assessment is not appropriate	• NICE guidance. • Brook traffic light tool • Child Sexual Behavior Checklist (Friedrich)	• NICE guidance. • Brook traffic light tool • DH Assessment Framework	• DH Assessment Framework • AIM2 • J-SOAP • ERASOR	• AIM2 • J-SOAP • ERASOR • SAVRY
Likely intervention focus	• Parent education and support (for example on appropriateness of child's behaviours)	• Boundary setting. • Support • Low key behaviour management	• Behaviour management. • Socio-educative work with the child/ family • System/ context change	• Protection of actual and likely victims • Risk management and relapse prevention • Supporting prosocial behaviour	• Protection of victims and public • Violence prevention • Risk management and relapse prevention • High level of management and supervision

Behaviour which falls within the 'inappropriate' category on the continuum can be responded to within the school, or between the school and the parents/carers. A single instance of inappropriate behaviour, for example, is likely to be addressed successfully by, sensitively, informing and educating the child/young person. If the behaviour involves more than one child or young person, or a group this may be addressed through PSE lessons.

The NSPCC has developed a series of bilingual resources¹⁹ to support the use of the PANTS resource in the classroom. The PANTS resource allows adults to have simple, age appropriate conversations with children about being safe and speaking out about anything that worries them.

Resources on healthy relationships include those provided by Schoolbeat²⁰ and Hafan Cymru's Spectrum Programme.²¹

CASE STUDY – Inappropriate behaviour

Jenny aged 12 years old was sent a video message by her friend. The video included content of adult sexual behaviour, Jenny forwarded it to the rest of their friendship group.

Jenny's friend was 13 years old and came across the video on social media. They shared it with Jenny stating "*this is sick isn't it*". Jenny agreed and forwarded it on.

One of the group's parents/carers came across the message and complained to the head of year about the content and was also unhappy as the video message had been shared during school hours. This is the first time any of the children involved have come to the school's attention for any concerning behaviour.

18 Hackett, S., Branigan, P. and Holmes, D. (2019) Harmful sexual behaviour framework: an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours. 2nd ed. London: NSPCC. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework>

19 <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/schools/pants-teaching>

20 <https://schoolbeat.cymru/>

21 <https://www.hafancymru.co.uk/our-services/projects-and-programmes/spectrum/>

Behaviour which falls within the ‘problematic’ category on the continuum may cover a range of worrying behaviours. It will be possible to address some of these within the school. Where the behaviour is deemed to be problematic and concerning, but with no overt elements of victimisation and where there is a lack of clarity with regard to consent issues, the school may be able to provide an in-house response which resolves the problem. More serious incidents, where the behaviour has involved lack of reciprocity or equal power, may also be dealt with within the school. The DSP will have oversight of these cases and where concerns remain, or further concerns or related issues emerge. The DSP should explore if the threshold for a safeguarding referral to statutory Children’s Services is met, leading to a strategy discussion taking place and subsequent HSB strategy meeting where appropriate.

CASE STUDY – Problematic behaviour

Sam age 14 years old sent messages of a sexual nature to girls in his year group as well as the year above and below. A few girls have complained and one says he has also asked on the school bus if he can see her breasts.

Sam has been spoken to by his form tutor a few times but the complaints about his behaviour continue to be made.

The girls say he makes them feel uncomfortable and refuse to sit next to him in class.

In some cases, behaviour which falls clearly at the high risk end of the ‘problematic’ category will need to be referred for a strategy discussion/ meeting immediately. The school’s response should then be informed by the outcome of the multi-agency HSB strategy meeting where the needs of all children concerned should be considered separately.

Education settings have a duty to report a child at risk under section 130 of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. Behaviours falling under the abusive and violent categories should be referred to children’s social services. Education settings should follow the process outlined in their safeguarding policies and in the All Wales Practice Guide on Safeguarding children where there are concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour.²² Under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority has a duty to investigate if a child appears to be suffering or is at risk of suffering significant harm.

Safety plans should be completed and implemented for each child to support their return or continued access to education and to ensure their own and the safety of others. In some cases, statutory services will complete proportionate assessments to determine any care and support needs for children who display problematic and concerning behaviour in addition to education safety plans.

CASE STUDY – Violent behaviour

During a school residential trip, Gethin aged 15 years old is reported to have engaged in oral sex with a male peer.

Following the trip his parents noticed he was distressed. He eventually told them that during a game of truth and dare he had gone along with the behaviour but had not felt comfortable doing it. He was upset and said that Jack, the leader in the group had threatened him that he could no longer be part of the group if he didn’t take the dare.

Simon is known to struggle socially and since returning to school Jack has told him that he has a video of the act. Jack has told him that unless he does it again he is going to share the video.

22 <https://safeguarding.wales/chi/c6/c6.p7.html>

Annex:

School safety plan example

Child Name	Year	Form
What are the behavioural patterns that present concern to the child or others		
Examples may be • Difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships with peers. • Difficulty problem solving, managing disagreements or conflict • Inappropriate comments or conversations with peers which lead to compromising and challenging situation for both the child and others. • Lack of awareness of age appropriate physical boundaries, spatial awareness and appropriate touch with other children or adults is causing complaint. • Lack of awareness of digital Safety, use of social networking and appropriate boundaries of Internet use and access is not age appropriate/is causing complaint. Concerns for child risk of exploitation online • Child struggles to regulate their own emotions and behaviour and relies upon adults to support with this. • Child needs modelling and guidance to navigate relationships romantic and friendships • Privacy rules are not age appropriate and does not appear to have a good understanding in regards to social norms of privacy, which can result in a complaint against the child and also increase their risk of exploitation		
What risks do we need to be concerned about and to whom?		
Risk to Child and others: Examples • Child does not have necessary skills to develop mutual relationships, which leaves them vulnerable to seek connection with others in inappropriate ways. • Child holds problematic norms and expectations in relationships which impact upon their behaviour • Over sharing of information without insight into privacy rules and boundaries increases risk to the child or others. • Child seeks to make a relationship with another exclusive and this is not reciprocated • Child has few internal boundaries to control their behavior which impacts upon impulsivity, reasoning and consequential thinking in the digital and non-digital world. • Lack of awareness of physical boundaries results in displays of over affection which is unwanted potentially leading to complaint. • Child has lack of awareness across ages including adults (teaching staff an visitors to the education setting) • Lack of awareness of privacy rules may expose child or others to harm		

What measures may be taken to meet underlying needs and reduce risk to the child and others?

Examples

- Access to a nurture provision during unstructured times such as at break and lunchtime. Child to have a pass to access immediate support
- Online Safety: Staff to be aware of the issues and to monitor Child's use when using ICT. Where possible child to sit near the teacher during these times.
- Staff to regularly check in with the child to ensure they are settled and understand the content of lessons.
- School Trips and events: 1 member of staff to supervise the child throughout the school trip and events. Staff should be aware of potential risk and strategies to be used. Seating plans on transport, careful thought about. Child to be aware of arrangements and identity of supportive adult/teacher.
- Peer Grouping in class etc: Relevant staff to be made aware of key issues and to be mindful of who child is grouped with and where in the room the group are placed, i.e. somewhere accessible for staff to monitor and near the door as the child may need to exit at short notice.
- Child has a packed lunch to avoid potential issues in canteen/break/lunch times.
- School transport is considered and if appropriate the child should be picked up after school by trusted carer/adult
- Appropriate referrals made to support any unmet needs the school are unable to meet.
- Changing for PE - staff will be notified to be mindful of changing room concerns and where necessary provide information to the child (in a way they understand) about what/ how to change.
- Timeout Card: if necessary child to be allocated a timecard as an aid to help them develop coping strategies/seek support.
- Support and Monitoring: For some children they will need to have continual 'line-in of sight' supervision. This should aim to offer the child a safer environment and greater opportunities for them to use learned skills, manage their emotions and behaviours, and development a sense of well-rounded independence.
- Designated staff member to touch base with the child regularly to prevent escalation of concern. For example upon arrival at school e.g. mornings to gauge mood of the child and remind them of support available/conduct. Make sure all relevant staff are vigilant if additional support is felt needed on any day or during any lesson.
- Child to receive regular feedback about what they are doing well and to be provided with examples, persons to model in regards to areas where they need support.
- Staff to be mindful of areas in the school where children gather out of sight of teaching staff and to steer child away from these area due to child's vulnerability
- Child to be supported to access additional/ after school activities wherever possible, ensuring actions above are implanted to keep all children safe

Additional supports required

Eg: Monitoring process implemented to revisit measures put in place at timely intervals or when the need arises.

Multi agency supports in place and communication is of a good level

Staff to receive training/consultation in regards to child sexual abuse including problematic sexual behaviours and child sexual exploitation both on and off line

What activities cannot reasonably be safely managed?

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Completed by:	
Date completed:	
Date of Review:	

1. Using the Continuum identified concerns fall within the inappropriate domain. A safety plan can be used to support the child within school without the need for external/statutory support.
 2. Using the continuum concerns fall in the problematic domain. A safety plan can be used to support the child within the school although support of other external agencies may be required to help keep the child and others safe.
 3. Using the continuum the concerns fall within the abusive/violent domain. A safety plan can be used to support the child within the school although statutory services should be informed in line with school protocols and National Guidance.
- Has all available information in relation to the pupil(s) been made available to all appropriate staff?
 - Have all appropriate services been contacted?
 - Are people potentially at risk aware of how they should respond?
 - Are all identified risk reduction measures in place?
 - Are there contingency plans for absent colleagues who are identified in safety plan measures?
 - Are appropriate emergency action plans in place (contact numbers for parent/carers, police, social workers)
 - Has the safety been brought to the attention of appropriate employees and others affected?

Please ensure that a copy of this form is saved to the child's file.



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