

Harmful Sexual Behaviours – Practitioner Briefing

Welcome to this briefing aims to help practitioners and their managers understand Harmful Sexual Behaviours in relation to children. This briefing refers to children which includes those up to the age of 18 years.



What is Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB)? (also called sexually harmful behaviour) is the term used to describe children who sexually abuse other children or adults. The sexual abuse perpetrated by children can be just as harmful as that perpetrated by an adult, so it is important to remember the impact on the victim as well as to focus on the treatment of the child exhibiting the HSB. **Harmful sexual behaviour can be defined as: 'One or more children engaging in sexual discussions or acts that are inappropriate for their age or stage of development. These can range from using sexually explicit words and phrases to full penetrative sex with other children or adults', NICE, September 2016. Technology Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour (TA-HSB)** is when children use the internet or other technology to engage in sexual activity that may be harmful to themselves and others. TA-HSB covers a range of behaviour including the developmentally inappropriate use of pornography, online sexual abuse, grooming, sexting. This includes both contact and non-contact behaviours (e.g. grooming, sexting, taking pictures) and/or the child has displayed a harmful behavioural threat (verbal, physical or emotional) to coerce, threaten or intimidate a victim. There is similarity between HSB and other forms of abuse, particularly Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and it is important that practitioners are aware about what is HSB. The understanding of HSB needs to be within the context of healthy sexual behaviour and how to differentiate between harm and normal exploration and sexual development. Abusive and/or inappropriate behaviour is often characterised by a lack of true consent, the presence of a power imbalance and exploitation.

What do we need to know? All children will enter a process of sexual development throughout their childhood/adolescence, and much of this forms a healthy and necessary part of growing up. However, for some, their behaviours will not be developmentally appropriate and, at times, may be harmful. In assessing how concerned we should be about children's sexual behaviours, we need to be aware of what is developmentally appropriate and what would be out of the norm. The context of the behaviour, level of understanding, cultural and peer norms as well as the reaction of the perceived victims are all important factors to consider when assessing how concerned we should be about HSB's displayed by children. **How common is HSB? NSPCC data** estimates the prevalence is around a third of child sexual abuse is by other children. Some cross-over between online/offline HSB and between CSE and HSB. HSB is most commonly identified in adolescent boys, but girls/younger children can also exhibit HSB. A significant proportion of children who display HSB also have a learning disability. The majority of children who display HSB have themselves experienced trauma, including abuse or neglect. Other indicators include attachment disorders, domestic abuse, previous sexual victimisation, social rejection and loneliness and poor empathy skills. Many of these factors exist alongside typical family environments where other forms of abuse are present. The majority of children displaying HSB do not become sexual offenders as adults. Children who display HSB often experience other emotional, behavioural and peer related difficulties. Existing indicators suggest HSB is a considerable social problem that is under-reported and may have serious negative impacts upon not only victims, but also the CYP who display the behaviours as well as their families/wider communities.

Possible Indicators of At-Risk or Abusive Behaviour

Sexual Behaviour: Behaviours beyond those expected for age (e.g. vaginal or oral intercourse, simulating intercourse with clothes off, sexually explicit proposals, compulsive masturbation). Behaviours become repetitive or obsessive. They are planned. They are not isolated events.

Nature of Interaction: Use of force, coercion, secrecy, or all three. Force may be physical or social in nature. It may involve threats, bribes, trickery, persuasion, intimidation, or peer pressure, potentially aimed at preventing the victim from disclosing. Any sexual acts unwanted by recipient. Any sadistic quality such as humiliation or degradation. The victim will present as having less power and control. There's likely to be a disparity in age; size; status; IQ; emotional vulnerability, and so on.

Emotional Behaviour: A range of emotional responses are associated with HSB, including: anger, rage, fear, loneliness, a lack of empathy for victims, and excitement or arousal. HSB may be a maladaptive coping mechanism to regulate emotional states.

Motivation: Children at risk of abusive behaviour may display a need to reduce negative feelings, e.g. fear, anger, loneliness, anxiety, guilt. They may exhibit a need for power and control. Other motivations could include a need to raise low self-esteem, achieve sexual gratification, or a compulsive re-enactment of their own abuse.

It is helpful to distinguish between problematic and abusive sexual behaviour: **Problematic** behaviours include behaviours involving sexual body parts that are developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful to the child or others. They range from problematic self-stimulation and nonintrusive behaviours, to sexual interactions with other children. It is helpful to distinguish between problematic and abusive sexual behaviour. Sometimes, the term 'problematic sexual behaviour' is used to describe behaviours that may be developmentally appropriate but that are expressed inappropriately in a given context. When this type of behaviour appears to be trauma-related – for example when symptoms originate from sexual abuse the child has experienced, the behaviour may be termed sexually reactive. Sexually reactive and sexually problematic behaviours are more commonly associated with children in the pre-adolescent age range. **Abusive** behaviours involve an element of coercion or manipulation and a power imbalance that means the victim cannot give informed consent, and where the behaviour has potential to cause physical or emotional harm. Power imbalance may be due to age, intellectual ability, disability or physical strength. Abusive sexual behaviour may or may not have resulted in a criminal conviction or prosecution. Such behaviours are more commonly associated with children over the age of criminal responsibility or those in puberty. As both problematic and abusive sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, a useful umbrella term is 'harmful sexual behaviour' or HSB.

What to do? Early intervention is essential – identifying behaviours at the lower end of the continuum and/or responding to low-level HSB in early childhood can help stop more serious behaviour in adolescence. A referral to Children's Services should be made where there are concerns about the welfare and safety of children including the victim, alleged perpetrator and any other children. Parental support is important in promoting engagement & successful outcomes. Both perpetrators and victims must be considered under **safeguarding procedures**. Most children who display HSB don't go on to become adult offenders. Empowering parents to teach their children to be safe online rather than restricting online activity enables CYP to engage constructively online and build resilience. Non-stigmatising, non-judgemental information and advice for children and families must be easily accessible. Under or overreaction by agencies can happen when developmental and behavioural pathways of children are misunderstood.

Further information and resources - NSPCC website - NSPCC Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) Audit Framework - NICE Guidance - Resources for schools from University of Bedfordshire and Pan Bedfordshire Child Protection Procedures.