

Harmful sexual behaviour: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around harmful sexual behaviour

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Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) can be a challenging issue for professionals to manage. A child who displays HSB can have a range of behaviours, which need a safeguarding response. HSB has been identified as a significant risk factor in some serious case reviews.

Published case reviews show that professionals can find it difficult to respond to the safeguarding implications of HSB. There may be several children involved, each of whom will have different needs, and minimising the immediate effects of an incident can become a priority. Because of this, professionals can find themselves managing individual episodes rather than looking at the bigger picture.

The learning from these reviews highlights that children who display HSB need support and understanding. HSB should be recognised as a potential indicator of abuse and professionals should work together to look for the reasons behind a child's behaviour and consider appropriate safeguarding responses.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on learning from case reviews published since 2010, where [harmful sexual behaviour](#) was highlighted as a significant issue.

The children in these case reviews faced a complex and wide range of risk factors. They became the subject of reviews following:

- involvement in sexually harmful behaviour
- death of a child following a violent incident involving other young people
- death of a child following a serious head injury
- [suicide of a young person](#) whose issues included displaying harmful sexual behaviour.

Key issues for harmful sexual behaviour in case reviews

HSB is not always recognised as a potential indicator of abuse

- Responding to individual incidents of HSB can become the focus of professionals' attention, rather than looking at patterns of behaviour and the reasons behind it.
- Professionals may not understand the seriousness of HSB so they do not always make appropriate referrals or follow-ups.
- Children who display HSB are not often discussed at multi-agency meetings, so no one gains an overview of the child's situation.
- If HSB is investigated as a criminal offence rather than a safeguarding concern, the child is not always given appropriate support and protection.

Confusion about who needs protection

- HSB can involve several children. Sometimes the needs or behaviour of one child can distract professionals' attention away from the needs of another.
- Sometimes a child's risk to others can overshadow any risks they are being exposed to. This may mean that the child is not supported appropriately.
- Some professionals feel that they only have a responsibility towards a specific group of children, which can mean that the safeguarding needs of other children are overlooked.
- It can be challenging for professionals to establish whether sexual activity has taken place between two children, and whether any of the children involved were coerced or forced into taking part. This makes it difficult to assess the risks to each child and offer the support needed.

Professional attitudes

- Some professionals may not fully understand the underlying risks of HSB and think it isn't serious enough to report or investigate.
- Sometimes professionals can assume that the sexual behaviour between two children is consensual, and believe they should respect the privacy of the children involved. This means that issues are not reported and information is not shared. This is a particular concern if at least one of the children involved is particularly vulnerable, for example if they are much younger or have a disability.
- Some professionals may not understand the reasons why children display HSB, seeing them as predators rather than vulnerable young people.

Capacity of services

- Due to lack of resources, it can take time for therapeutic intervention to be offered to a child.

Learning for improving practice

Looking at the wider context

- Professionals should look beyond individual incidents of HSB, at the overall patterns which emerge.
- Accurate, detailed records should be kept about incidents of HSB. This will help professionals now and in the future to get an overview of what is happening.
- It's important to identify the reasons behind the child's behaviour and take action to address them.
- Professionals should adopt a child-centred approach, working with children to find out what risks they are exposed to and what their needs are.
- Professionals should consider the child's use of social media and whether they are a part of any networks that promote harmful sexual behaviours.
- As long as there is no risk in doing so, professionals should tell parents about any incidents of HSB that their child has been involved in, and help them to support their child appropriately.

Awareness and training

- Organisations should have specific procedures for responding to HSB and safeguarding all the children involved. All staff should be made aware of these and know how to follow them.

Referrals and multi-agency working

- Referrals should be made to children's social work services early on so that any risks to children can be properly identified and ongoing support can be provided.
- Information about children who display HSB should be shared between agencies so that professionals can get an overview of the child's situation and identify any risks they are exposed to.
- Professionals working together need to be clear about their individual roles and how this contributes to the overall safeguarding of the children involved.

Tools and guidance for professionals

The [Harmful sexual behaviour framework](#) helps local authorities to develop a more consistent multi-agency response to children who display HSB.

The NICE guidance for responding to [HSB among children and young people](#) gives advice to ensure that problems are identified and addressed early, and that children are appropriately referred to specialist services for help.

Contact the NSPCC's Knowledge and Information Service with any questions about child protection or related topics:

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