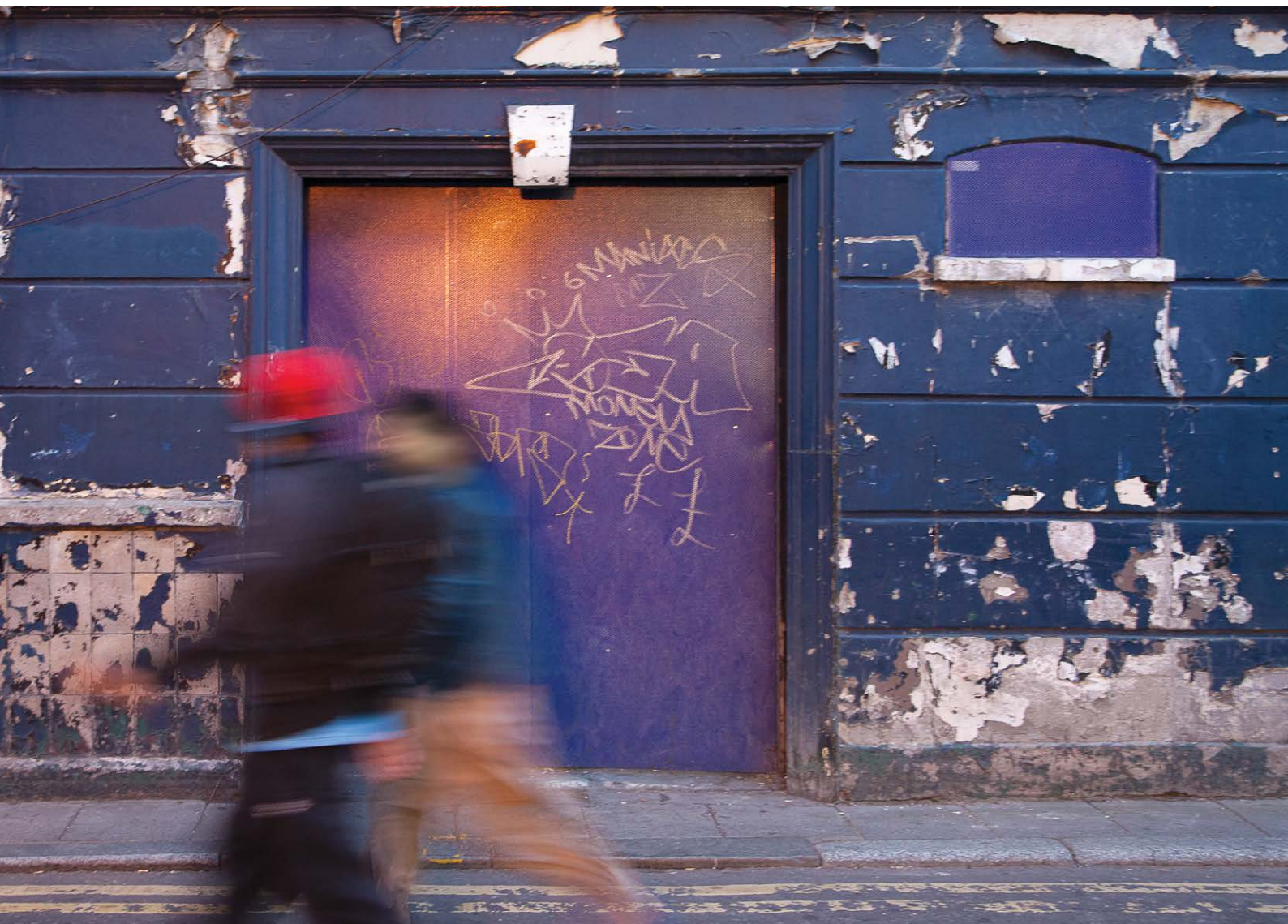


research
in practice

RESEARCH REVIEW
Executive Summary

Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours

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Introduction

The problem of children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours

This executive summary of the full Research Review is concerned with children and young people who commit acts of sexual abuse or who harm others as a result of their sexual behaviours.

This is a contested area of policy and practice. The largely hidden nature of child sexual abuse makes recognition difficult; the stigma and shame associated with victimisation may lead to under-reporting, making it difficult to accurately measure the true scale of the problem (Masson, 2001).

Nonetheless, official statistics and existing research suggest that children and young people account for about a quarter of all convictions against victims of all ages (Vizard, 2004) and a third of all sexual abuse coming to the attention of the professional system in the UK (Erooga and Masson, 2006).

In many cases, children and young people occupy dual identities as perpetrator of abuse *and* victim of harm. There is a developing body of research into the issue of children and young people as the perpetrators of acts of sexual abuse, but to date UK-based studies are limited. There is significant overlap between issues associated with sexual abuse by youth and the broader fields of child sexual exploitation, domestic violence, neglect and mental health.

Reflecting a growing professional consciousness, many Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) in England now acknowledge the issue of young people with harmful sexual behaviours in their interagency procedures and policy documents. However, no national strategy or overarching service delivery framework exists for this issue in the UK.

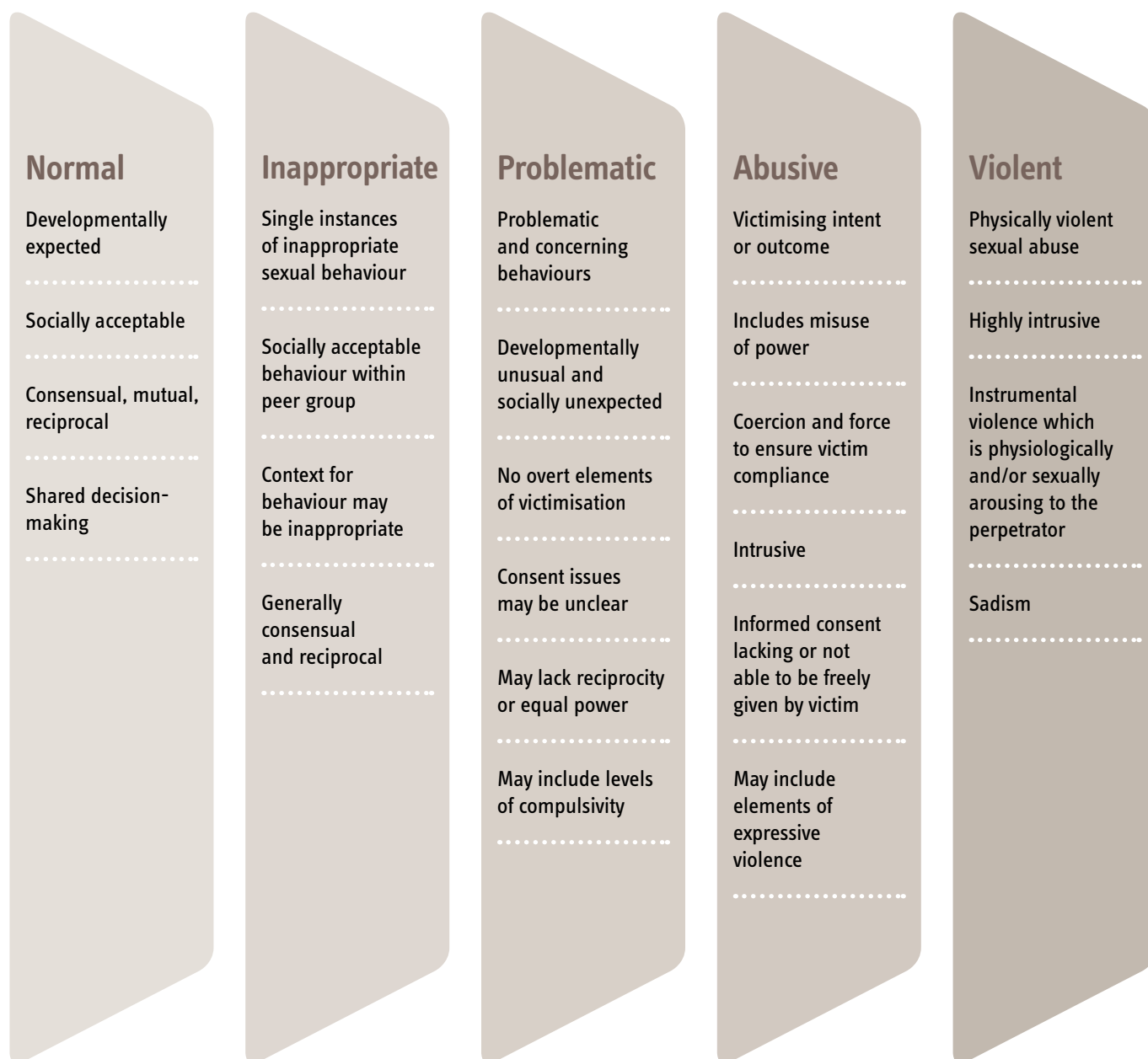
Differences in terminology

Clouding the issues are the different terms that are used to describe harmful sexual behaviours. The term 'sexually abusive' is mainly used to indicate sexual behaviours that are initiated by a child or young person where there is an element of manipulation or coercion (Burton et al, 1998) or where the subject of the behaviour is unable to give informed consent.

By contrast, the term 'sexually problematic' is more often used to refer to sexual activities that do not include an element of victimisation, but that may interfere with the development of the child demonstrating the behaviour or which might provoke rejection, cause distress or increase the risk of victimisation of the child.

The important distinction here is that whilst abusive behaviour is by definition also problematic, problematic behaviours may not necessarily be abusive (Hackett, 2004). As both 'abusive' and 'problematic' sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, a useful umbrella term is 'harmful sexual behaviours'.

Children and young people's sexual behaviours exist on a wide continuum, from 'Normal' and 'Developmentally expected' to 'Highly abnormal' and 'Abusive'.



A continuum of children and young people's sexual behaviours
(Hackett, 2010)

Assessing where any reported behaviour fits on this continuum can be a complex process. It is important to place any child's sexual behaviour within a developmental context and recognise the key differences between the motivations and meanings of such behaviours at varying stages of development.

There are a range of frameworks and checklists to locate children and young people's sexual behaviours at various levels of seriousness or concern. In the UK, the young people's sexual health charity Brook has launched an online sexual behaviours 'traffic light' tool for professionals which distinguishes between three levels (green, amber, red) of sexual behaviour in children and young people - www.brook.org.uk/index.php/traffic-lights.