

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

An Overview

18th September 2025

Maxine Bryant ISW & Dialogue Trainer



Health Warning



- In January 2025 the NSPCC published some data indicating that 1 in 20 children have been sexually abused.



What are your organisations/ your own biggest challenges with harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful Sexual Behaviour - Mentimeter



What is Harmful Sexual Behaviour?

- “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, 2014).
- They can include both online (technology assisted) and contact behaviours. What might examples of these behaviours be?



- HSB exhibited by young children is very different to that shown by young people. 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. Many pre-pubescent children who display HSB have been directly or indirectly sexually abused, their behaviour may be indicative of ‘acting out’ or ‘mimicking’ such experiences. (Barnardo’s, no date)

Problematic vs Harmful

- Problematic behaviours don't include overt victimisation of others but are developmentally disruptive and can cause distress, rejection or increase victimisation of the child displaying the behaviour- more often associated with pre-pubescent children.
- 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, race 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 young people over the age of criminal responsibility or those in puberty. (Harmful Sexual behaviour framework).



NICE Guidelines 2016

- <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG55>
- Outlines multi-agency approach
- Early help
- Risk Assessment
- Engaging with families
- Care/safety plans
- Interventions



Brook Traffic Light Tool

- <https://www.brook.org.uk/education/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>
- Requires training before you are able to use it



Behaviours: age 13 to 17

All green, amber and red behaviours require some form of attention and response. It is the level of intervention that will vary.

What is a green behaviour?

Green behaviours reflect safe and healthy sexual development. They are:

- displayed between children or young people of similar age or developmental ability
- reflective of natural curiosity, experimentation, consensual activities and positive choices

What is an amber behaviour?

Amber behaviours have the potential to be outside of safe and healthy behaviour. They may be:

- of potential concern due to age, or developmental differences
- of potential concern due to activity type, frequency, duration or context in which they occur

What is a red behaviour?

Red behaviours are outside of safe and healthy behaviour. They may be:

- excessive, secretive, compulsive, coercive, degrading or threatening
- involving significant age, developmental, or power differences
- of concern due to the activity type, frequency, duration or the context in which they occur

What can you do?

Green behaviours provide opportunities to give positive feedback and additional information.

Green behaviours

- solitary masturbation
- sexually explicit conversations with peers
- obscenities and jokes within the current cultural norm
- interest in erotica/pornography
- use of internet/e-media to chat online
- having sexual or non-sexual relationships
- sexual activity including hugging, kissing, holding hands
- consenting oral and/or penetrative sex with others of the same or opposite gender who are of similar age and developmental ability
- choosing not to be sexually active

What can you do?

Amber behaviours signal the need to take notice and gather information to assess the appropriate action.

Amber behaviours

- accessing exploitative or violent pornography
- uncharacteristic and risk-related behaviour, e.g. sudden and/or provocative changes in dress, withdrawal from friends, mixing with new or older people, having more or less money than usual, going missing
- concern about body image
- taking and sending naked or sexually provocative images of self or others
- single occurrence of peeping, exposing, mooning or obscene gestures
- giving out contact details online
- joining adult- only social networking sites and giving false personal information
- arranging a face to face meeting with an

What can you do?

Red behaviours indicate a need for immediate intervention and action.

Red behaviours

- exposing genitals or masturbating in public
- preoccupation with sex, which interferes with daily function
- sexual degradation/humiliation of self or others
- attempting/forcing others to expose genitals
- sexually aggressive/exploitative behaviour
- sexually explicit talk with younger children
- sexual harassment
- non-consensual sexual activity
- use of/acceptance of power and control in sexual relationships
- genital injury to self or others

Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework (2019)

- Updated 2019
- Simon Hackett, Pat Banigan (NSPCC)
- [Harmful sexual behaviour framework: an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours](#)



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

1

Response

2

Prevention

3

Assessment

4

Intervention

5

Development

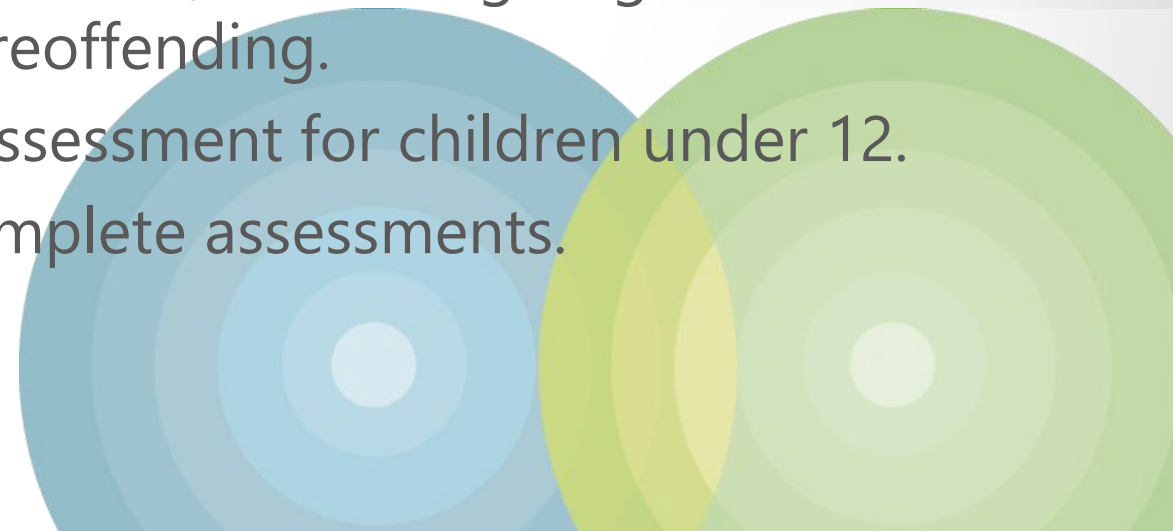
Lucy FaithFull Foundation Traffic Light Tool

- https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Traffic_Light_Guide_Teenager.pdf



AIM 3 Assessments (The Aim Project)

- The AIM 3 assessment is a structured tool designed to evaluate adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviours (HSB), focusing on their needs, risks, and the context of their actions.
- Purpose of AIM 3 Assessment: The AIM 3 assessment aims to provide a comprehensive evaluation of young individuals aged 12 to 18 who are known to engage in harmful sexual behaviors, including both contact and technology-assisted offenses. It helps professionals understand the specific needs and risks associated with each adolescent, facilitating targeted interventions to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.
- Aim under 12's assessment- a specialist assessment for children under 12.
- Requires specialist training in order to complete assessments.



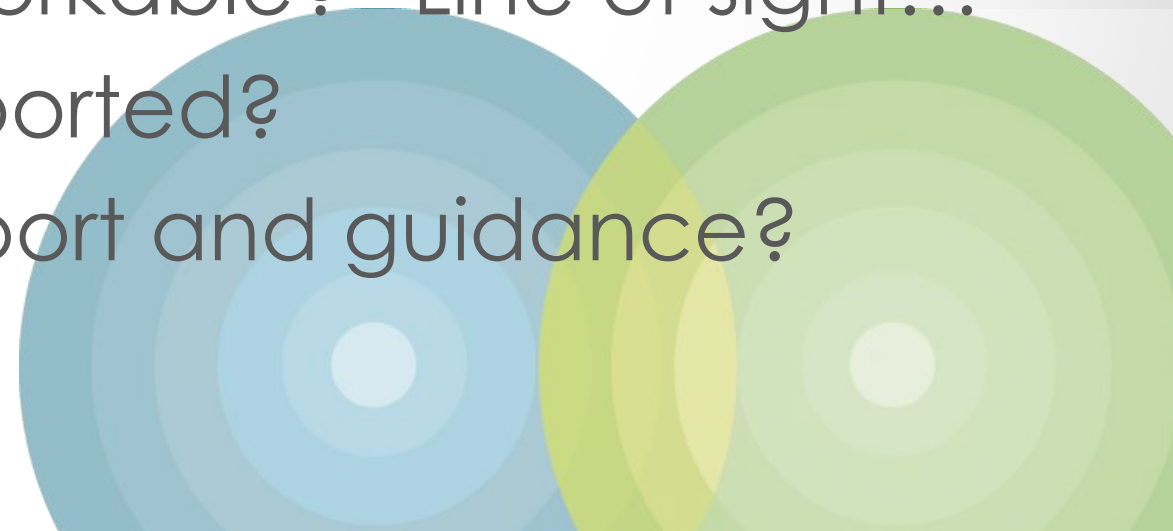
- **Changing Residential Child Care: A Systems Approach to Consultation Training and Development : Gibson. J, Leonard.,M and Wilson.,M. In Child Care in Practice Vol10, No.4. October 2004**



Managing Behaviour within Residential Settings

- What are the challenges for you?
- Decision making around accepting a child with HSB?
- Can the child live with others?
- Has there been an AIM 3 assessment? Access to an intervention programme?
- Is there a safety plan? Is it workable? “Line of sight...”
- Do staff feel skilled and supported?
- Do you have access to support and guidance?

•



What Can Dialogue Offer?

- Consultations, advice and supervision
- AIM 3 assessments
- Training on Harmful Sexual Behaviour. Next course running on: Monday 1st December 2025 online.
- Specific training can be designed and delivered to staff teams in house (face to Face or Remote).



What do you still have questions on?



References

Hackett, S (2014). Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours.
London: Research in Practice

Barnados (no date) Harmful Sexual Behaviour- A guide to support
understanding and practise responses in Wales

NSPCC Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1657/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework.pdf>

