



Children's MARS Guidance

Working with Children and Young People who display Harmful Sexual Behaviour

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Contents

[Introduction and definition](#)

[Behaviours typical of each developmental stage](#)

[Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#)

[Referral](#)

[The Harmful Sexual Behaviour Panel](#)

[Further information, advice and guidance](#)

Introduction and definition

This guidance is for professionals working with children and young people who display inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), including disabled children and young people. This may include, if appropriate, instances where a child or young person is assessed to be at risk of engaging in this type of behaviour. The procedure applies whether the victim is:

- outside of the child's immediate household, or
- within the household, e.g. sibling abuse

The [NSPCC Harmful Sexual Behaviour Framework](#) (2016) provides a useful supporting document to this procedure. It provides an evidence-based tool for a coordinated, multi-agency response to HSB.

Definition

Harmful Sexual Behaviour can be defined as:

Children's sexual behaviour exists on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent. Problematic, abusive and violent sexual behaviour is developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage. A useful umbrella term is "harmful sexual behaviour" (HSB). The term has been widely adopted in child protection. HSB can occur online and/or face to face and can also occur simultaneously between the two. HSB should be considered in a child protection context.

When considering HSB, ages and the stages of development of the children are critical factors. Sexual behaviour between children can be considered harmful if one of the children is much older, particularly if there is more than two years' difference or if one of the children is pre-pubescent and the other is not. However, a younger child can abuse an older child, particularly if they have power over them, for example, if the older child is disabled or smaller in stature.

For further information, see [Sexual violence and harassment between children in schools and colleges \(2021\) DfE](#)

The current definition of sexual abuse in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 is also relevant as it recognises that abuse can be perpetrated by children as well as adults

As well as developing physically and emotionally, children will also exhibit sexual behaviour as a normal part of growing up. A child's sexual development expresses itself in a range of behaviours, most of which are healthy and normal.

However, sometimes a child's behaviour may be unusual, worrying or even harmful. Deciding whether behaviour is normal, worrying or abusive will depend on the age of the child, the situation and the child's level of understanding.

Harmful sexual behaviour is at one end of a continuum of sexual behaviour and sexual behaviour becomes abusive when there is an element of force or enticement inflicted by a perpetrator on a victim.

Sexual abuse can take several different forms, including (but not exclusively):

- Enticing or forcing a child to engage in fondling, masturbation, oral or anal intercourse or sexual intercourse
- Making a child observe inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Showing a child pornographic books, videos or photographs or engaging them in inappropriate discussion about sexual matters
- Meeting a child following sexual 'grooming', (when an abuser deliberately builds up a relationship with a child) with the intention of abusing them at some stage

Behaviours typical of each developmental stage

Sexual development progresses through several different phases:

- Infancy
- Young school age
- Pre-adolescence
- Adolescence

Each stage has behaviours that are considered 'age-appropriate', although it is also normal to see a child exhibiting behaviour from the age group immediately above or below them.

If a child has learning difficulties or behavioural difficulties, it is important to consider their developmental stage when deciding if their behaviour is normal.

For a variety of reasons some adults may feel uncomfortable when they see children displaying sexual behaviour. Age, gender, personal experiences, cultural background, religious beliefs and even our profession can affect our feelings and judgments, so it is helpful to have a general guide to what are 'usual' or typical age-appropriate behaviours. Below are some examples of behaviours typical of each developmental stage.

Infancy (approximate age 2 to 4)

- Kisses and/or hugs others
- Is curious about and looks at others' private body parts
- Talks about private body parts using own words or those taught by or learned from carers and older siblings
- Uses words such as 'poo', 'bum' and 'willy' freely
- Plays 'house' or 'doctor' games
- Shows, touches, or rubs own genitals
- Sometimes engages in self-soothing behaviour (masturbates)

Young school age (approximate age 5 to 9)

- Kisses and/or hugs others
- Displays an interest in others' bodies

- Sometimes uses 'swear' words and/or 'sex' words
- Plays 'house' or 'doctor' games
- Occasionally shows private body parts to others ("moons")
- Engages in self-soothing behaviour (touches or rubs own genitals, masturbates)

Pre-adolescent (approximate age 10 to 12)

- Kisses, hugs, pets, 'dates' others
- Is interested in others' bodies; may look at sexual pictures including internet images
- Touches others' genitals
- Masturbates

Adolescent (approximate age 13-16)

- Asks questions about relationships and sexual behaviour
- Uses sexual language and talks about sexual acts with peers
- Looks at pictures of nude people
- Masturbates in private
- Experiments sexually with adolescents of similar age
- May seek access to service connected with sexual health and contraception

It is normal for children and young people of all ages to play and experiment and be curious about their own and each other's bodies.

Behaviour may be concerning if:

- a child is displaying behaviour that is not age-appropriate / developmentally appropriate (professionals should be mindful that behaviour that is typical of a stage above or below the child's chronological age may be normal. Also, when a child has learning disabilities, it is their developmental stage that is important, rather than chronological age)
- a child has sexual knowledge beyond what would be expected at their age / stage of development
- the behaviour involves children of significantly different ages / developmental stages
- any child is being made to do something they do not want to do
- the behaviour persists or is becoming more serious
- the behaviour follows or is accompanied by force, aggression, bribery, coercion or trickery
- the behaviour is affecting other areas of the child's life, for example their school performance, their social interaction with others or their physical well-being
- the behaviour is compulsive

Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Professionals should talk to the child calmly and ask them about what happened. Sometimes children do not realise that certain behaviour is okay in private but not in public, nor do they realise that their behaviour is upsetting or harming other children. They may be uncomfortable talking about sexual issues and may also be worried they are in trouble, so your tone and manner are very important

If the demonstrated behaviour is within the normal range but has occurred in an inappropriate place or at an inappropriate time, you may need to do nothing more than speak to the child and usually involve the child's parents or carers. You may then need to monitor the child's behaviour.

If behaviours continue to occur, parents/carers can be advised to see the child's GP, who can decide whether referral on to other services is required. Professionals should also consider carrying out an Early Help Assessment to draw in other agencies (such as educational psychology or family support) which can help deal with the issues presented within the early help arena.

If you feel that the behaviour constitutes sexual abuse of another child or that the child displaying the behaviour may be the victim of sexual abuse elsewhere, then you should follow the child protection policy of your organisation and discuss the issues with your designated safeguarding lead.

The designated safeguard lead should follow their organisational and Children's MARS policy and procedure for assessing need and providing help. Professionals should be mindful that inappropriate sexual behaviour is also likely to be harmful to the child displaying it and may have been prompted by the child being exposed to inappropriate materials or suffering abuse either at the hands of other children or adults.

You may talk to the child or children involved (separately) before you speak to either the parents or carers. However, you must not try to investigate – simply encourage the child to speak and listen to what is said. Plan carefully and keep a record of the incident(s).

Based on what you hear, follow the Children's MARS policy and procedures for assessing need and providing help, and discuss your concerns either with the police or with Children's Services Single Point of Contact.

Referral

Concerns about a child or young person's harmful sexual behaviour should be discussed with a manager and or designated professional for safeguarding and a referral made to Children's Services. This discussion must not result in a delay in referring the concerns.

North Lincolnshire Children's Services Single Point of Contact can be contacted on:

- 01724 296500 (9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday, 9am to 4.30pm Friday)
- 08081 689667 (free phone)
- 01724 296555 (answerphone – out of office hours and at weekends)

For more information see [Children's MARS Policy and Procedures Assessing Need and Providing Help](#)

Depending on the nature of the behaviours, a Children's Services Assessment may take place to see if any child requires services as a Child in Need, or whether a strategy discussion is needed. This will determine whether a child protection enquiry is undertaken or

not. Such an enquiry would be undertaken through a Children's Services Assessment and may be conducted alongside a police investigation. If the assessment determined that harmful sexual behaviour was an issue, and the child is over 12 years old there is the option to refer to the Harmful Sexual Behaviour Panel.

The Harmful Sexual Behaviour Panel

The Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) Panel is a multi-agency meeting which facilitates a specialist service to children and young people who have engaged in or are considered as being highly likely to engage in HSB.

The HSB Panel receives referrals for a specialist AIM2 assessment carried out by a multi-agency group of specially trained workers. These workers will also lead interventions to address the issues, in cooperation with other agencies, working to an intervention plan.

The HSB Panel is the referral and allocation route for HSB specialist assessment and intervention work, acts as a source of knowledge, expertise and support for the practitioner team and provides senior management oversight of HSB work.

Aims and objectives of the Panel

- Safeguarding and protection - reducing harm to children and vulnerable adults.
- A cost-effective alternative to agency assessment, agency placement, remand, and custody by utilising the skills of the existing workforce across the partnership
- Building capacity, developing skills and expertise amongst a pool of staff who can assess children and young people and deliver bespoke interventions when needed.
- Reducing delay, responding at the earliest stage to prevent escalation and improve outcomes for children and young people, reducing the likelihood of them becoming convicted sex offenders, enhancing life chances for social integration, education, training, and employment.
- Reducing criminalisation of children and young people on the cusp of offending by early identification of the need for support to children and young people who already have significant histories and optimising chances of community rehabilitation
- Diverting children and young people from custody through an integrated approach to working with them and their families utilising skilled assessment, management of risk and delivery of timely interventions
- Improved information sharing and partnership working
- Effective risk management at every level, managing with external controls and increasing Children's MARS Board and the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) confidence in managing these children and young people
- Developing the skills to enable the workforce to differentiate between normal experimental behaviours, and harmful or offensive behaviours and preventing high threshold referrals at a later stage

Referrals to the Panel

HSB assessment and planning should run parallel to any Children's Services Assessment or

statutory plan therefore referrals to the HSB Panel are made by Children's Services or the Youth Justice Partnership.

Referrals will be considered by the HSB Panel, concerning children and young people who:

- Have engaged in HSB resulting in significant harm to another child or young person, including contact and non-contact
- Are assessed as being likely to engage in HSB that would result in significant harm to themselves or others
- Are aged between 12 -18 years for assessment and/or interventions. However, the HSB Panel may provide discretionary consultation/guidance regarding younger children
- Give consent for the referral being completed and the consent of the parents/guardians is gained. If both parties do not give consent, this will be explored further by a HSB Practitioner and/or the referrer

Referrals will be considered from targeted and specialist agencies that have had a child fitting the above criteria referred to them as part of their responsibilities and duties. Referrals will be submitted to the panel chair.

The panel expects referrals to be accompanied by appropriate assessment reports detailing the requirement for referral to the virtual team.

The panel will have sole discretion over whether a referral is accepted or not. Where a referral is not accepted, the panel will provide explanation as to why it is not accepted.

It will be expected that the referring agency will act as lead professional for the case with the virtual team acting to support their work with a more specialised assessment of risk and intervention.

Where the criteria are met, referrals are made to MAPPA and risk strategy meetings are held jointly with partners to manage complex risks and vulnerabilities. Where police investigations are ongoing and charging or prosecution is likely Youth Justice Partnership (YJP) practitioners take the lead.

Allocation, assessment and planning

Cases accepted by the HSB Panel are discussed before being allocated to a lead HSB practitioner and co-worker who will undertake an AIM2 assessment and/or intervention. They will make recommendations including further interventions to the next HSB Panel. Normal statutory planning and processes including Child in Need plans, Child Protection plans, Child in Care plans, Out of Court Disposal or statutory Court Orders continue in tandem with the HSB intervention.

Integral to the plan is ensuring access to appropriate education, training and employment and socialisation whilst ensuring other children are safeguarded and where safe to do so. Parents and carers are fully involved in the plans and supported to help their child achieve a good outcome.

If a child is approaching their 18th birthday and they require intervention, an assessment may not be completed to allow for the interventions to be completed in the timeframe available.

They will be allocated after the HSB Panel, and the practitioners will commence the interventions as soon as possible.

The HSB assessment and planning can also inform Pre-Sentence Reports, community sentencing options, Detention and Training Order planning and release planning. On occasions YJP leads have co-worked the HSB intervention plan with custodial staff during the custodial period and worked with parents whilst the young person is in custody.

Clinical supervision is available to HSB practitioners via the HSB Panel and senior practitioners and managers oversee the AIM2 assessment. The HSB Panel aims to review the intervention plan at 3 monthly intervals as a minimum or more frequently if required. HSB practitioners co-work cases and joint management oversight is provided, thereby developing effective practice and monitoring progress and outcomes.

The HSB Panel records completion and closure of HSB input and writes to service providers where appropriate regarding any further work which is recommended or outstanding.

Further information, advice and guidance

Local information, advice and guidance

North Lincolnshire Risk Outside the Home Approach

This document sets out the local response to risk outside the home within the context of the One Family Approach.

[North Lincolnshire Risk Outside the Home Approach](#)

Children's MARS Risk Outside the Home toolkit

This toolkit contains a range of guidance and resources which practitioners can use when working with children, young people, families and vulnerable people who may be at risk of and/or are experiencing harm outside of the home (including harmful sexual behaviour)

[Children's MARS Risk Outside the Home toolkit](#)

Children's MARS Harmful Sexual Behaviour awareness training presentation for schools and colleges

This presentation provides staff with information and advice about Harmful Sexual Behaviour and how to respond.

The presentation can be found alongside the e-workbooks on the [training page](#) of the Children's MARS website.

National information, advice and guidance

NSPCC Podcast Series on HSB in Educational Settings

The NSPCC has produced a 3-part podcast series to help professionals within education settings:

- [understand what HSB is and how it can be displayed](#)

- [how to assess sexualised behaviour](#)
- [how to prevent and respond to HSB](#)

Sexual harassment among young people – awareness video

This film discusses the issue of sexual harassment among young people. The film is animated and available in 4 languages (English, Slovenian, Portuguese and Maltese). It is intended for the general public as well as for specific use in schools, training courses, seminars, etc., which address sexual harassment among young people and encourage observers' interventions

[Sexual harassment among young people - YouTube](#)

Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service – SWGfL and The Marie Collins Foundation

Funded by the Home Office and in collaboration with the Department for Education, a support service for professionals working with children and young people in tackling harmful sexual behaviours has been made available.

The support service is available for anyone in England working with children and young people, particularly, designated safeguarding leads within primary and secondary schools and alternative provision. Support is also available to early years provision, colleges and wider safeguarding professionals (including police, social workers and health care professionals). If children within your care have been displaying or are affected by specific incidents of Harmful Sexual Behaviour, the support service can provide initial support and signpost to further resources and advice.

The Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service will provide:

- advice on individual cases or incidents of harmful sexual behaviour, to ensure an appropriate response both for children displaying this behaviour and others affected by it
- guidance on policy development on tackling harmful sexual behaviour
- relevant resources, best practice and contacts around harmful sexual behaviour, both locally and nationally

The telephone and email support is available Monday – Friday, 8am to 8pm.

Call: 0344 255 0623

Email: hsbs@swgfl.org.uk

More information can be found on [their website](#)

Children’s Society guide for responding to children telling you they have experienced sexual abuse, sexual violence and sexual harassment

Children sharing experience of sexual abuse, sexual violence and sexual harassment need to be responded to sensitively. This guide provides advice to practitioners around how to respond to a child telling them about their experience of sexual abuse.

[Guide for responding to children telling you they have experienced sexual abuse, sexual](#)

[violence and sexual harassment](#)

NSPCC Harmful Sexual Behaviour framework (Hackett continuum of HSB)

This framework helps local areas develop and improve multi-agency responses to children displaying HSB. It provides a coordinated, systematic and evidence-based approach to recognising and responding to the risks and needs of this vulnerable group.

[Harmful sexual behaviour framework | NSPCC Learning](#)

Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool

Brook's Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool and training provides a highly visible, multi-agency response that helps professionals to identify, understand and respond appropriately to sexual behaviours in young people.

The training and accompanying tool equip professionals to make consistent and informed decisions that neither stigmatise nor criminalise young people. Participants will learn about healthy sexual development, understand key laws relating to sexual behaviour and gain knowledge on enabling robust and meaningful conversations around harmful sexual behaviours that cause concern.

Training in the Brook traffic light tool is required before it can be used in practice. Training can be accessed through the [Children's MARS education and training programme](#) or directly from [Brook Young People](#).

The Lucy Faithful Foundation - Stop it Now Traffic Light Tool

The Stop It Now traffic light tool can help practitioners to identify and respond appropriately to sexual behaviours, providing a standardised approach to understanding healthy and harmful behaviour.

[Lucy Faithful Stop It Now Traffic Light Tool](#)

The Lucy Faithful Foundation – HSB toolkit

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation has developed a toolkit for parents, carers and professionals to help them be aware of the risks of harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people, so that they know what they can do to prevent. It contains advice, information, resources and links to useful organisations and further support

[Worried about a young person or child's sexual behaviour - Stop It Now](#)

Harmful Sexual Behaviour research - Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse

This document shares key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour and discusses effective assessment, interventions and preventative approaches.

[Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual](#)

Learning from case reviews – Harmful Sexual Behaviour

This briefing by the NSPCC is based on learning from case reviews published since 2010, where harmful sexual behaviour was highlighted as a significant issue.

[Harmful sexual behaviour: learning from case reviews | NSPCC Learning](#)

Government guidance

- [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#) (Ofsted, 2021)
- [Guidance overview: Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#) (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2020)
- [Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Between Children in Schools and Colleges \(2021\) Department for Education](#)
- [Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges \(2021\) Ofsted](#)
- [Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours \(2014\) Research in Practice](#)
- [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour \(2018\) Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- [Harmful sexual behaviour: learning from case reviews \(2021\) NSPCC](#)
- [Young people who engage in child sexual exploitation behaviours - An exploratory study \(2018\) Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse](#)
- [Child's Play? Preventing Abuse Among Children and Young People \(2020\) Stop It Now](#)