

Harmful Sexual Behaviour - Case Studies and FAQs

Frequently asked questions relating to incidents of Harmful Sexual Behaviour



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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to help increase understanding of the type of incidents of harmful sexual behaviour. These FAQs are based on cases that have been reported to the Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service (HSBSS) and aim to provide some guidance on what to do should you be dealing with something similar. This document can also be a useful resource to share with staff to help raise awareness of harmful sexual behaviour. This resource is for anyone working with children and young people and contains scenarios from a range of professions.

General Questions

This first section contains some general questions relating to Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB).

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful sexual behaviour is '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 abusive towards another child, young person or adult' (Hackett, 2014).

Harmful sexual behaviour can occur online and/or face-to-face. HSB should be considered in a child protection context. Harmful sexual behaviours could include using highly sexualised language, non-consensual touching of others, persistent private and or public masturbation, sexual harassment and or accessing violent pornography. This is not an exhaustive list.

To better understand the full scope of behaviours and when the context that means they are problematic, please refer to the Hackett continuum and how to use it here:

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour/understanding>

How do you know if a child's behaviour is harmful sexual behaviour or not?

As children grow and learn about their bodies and relationships, they display certain behaviours linked to their age and stage of development. There is a generally accepted range

of behaviours which are viewed as developmentally appropriate. Harmful sexual behaviour is usually seen as part of a continuum and may be one part of a pattern of concerning behaviours.

Context is key to understanding if the behaviour is harmful or age appropriate. Check your local safeguarding partners' (previously known as LSCB) online procedures for identifying harmful sexual behaviours.

Additionally, the NSPCC has some really clear advice and guidance that can be found here (this advice refers to the Hackett continuum): <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour/understanding#heading-top>

What are school or college responsibilities regarding harmful sexual behaviour?

[Keeping children safe in education](#) is statutory government guidance for schools and colleges in England to safeguard children and young people. Harmful sexual behaviour falls within an education establishment's safeguarding responsibilities.

Schools and colleges should put in place appropriate safeguards to prevent and respond to harmful sexual behaviour, including in safeguarding/child protection policies; staff training/induction; providing age-appropriate education about harmful sexual behaviour to children and young people; and ensuring there are easily accessible systems in place for children to confidently report abuse.

All staff should know what to do if they have a concern or a child tells them about harmful sexual behaviour. There should be a clear process for responding to such concerns appropriately, which may include referral to statutory services. All staff should maintain an attitude of 'it could happen here', even if there have been no reported instances of harmful sexual behaviour.

Full guidance is available in [Keeping children safe in education](#) and [Working together to safeguard children](#). To help with this, we have the following resources available:

- School template policy
- Risk assessment template
- Writing effective referrals

You can [access these resources on the SWGfL website](#).

How should we respond if a young person displays harmful sexual behaviour?

Part 5 of [Keeping children safe in education](#) outlines the approach of educational establishments to child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment, including steps for responding to reports of sexual violence and sexual harassment.

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse has developed a [Safety Planning in Education guide](#) which provides support for those in education settings to respond to children's needs and safety when incidents of harmful sexual behaviour occur.

Scenarios

In this second section we detail some scenarios to help increase understanding of the types of harmful sexual behaviour issues professionals reported to the HSB Support Service.

Scenario 1

Issue

I am a designated safeguarding lead (DSL) of a mainstream primary school. A report has been filed that a Year 5 pupil has been using sexualised language and touching other same-age pupils without invitation. How should I approach this?

Response

Prepare a safe / no-blame environment to talk with each of the pupils separately, making sure the conversations are happening in a quite private space away from the classroom and other distractions. When having these conversations, the teacher should adopt a calm and non-judgemental manner.

It is important to get a clear picture of what and how this has happened. Ensure that the school offers the appropriate support to the victims, being sure to ask and consider what actions they would like to happen next. It may be necessary to have a conversation with their parents to assure them you are responding and will do all you can to keep their child safe. The conversation with the pupil displaying harmful sexual behaviour needs to try and establish the root cause of the behaviour and explain to them why the behaviour is harmful.

It is important to remember that the child displaying the behaviour will also need to be appropriately supported and safeguarded.

If this is a one-off event, ensure monitoring of the pupil to see if such behaviour repeats and becomes harmful to other children. Record all actions taken on your child protection recording system. Review the school's Relationships Education programme to address possible gaps in healthy relationship development. It would be worth reviewing the staff development plan to enhance staff understanding of the categories of harmful sexual behaviour.

Scenario 2

Issue

I am a designated safeguarding lead (DSL) for a Special Unit for Social, Emotional & Mental Health students. I have a Year 8 student using threatening and sexually offensive language towards adults in our Unit. Records have shown that this has gone on since their entry to the Unit over a year ago. Recent escalations have meant that a referral to Children's Services was made with additional staff time allocated. Whilst the situation has stabilised, it is not improving. What else can we do?

Response:

It is important to recognise that change in student behaviour takes time - the changes in one's behaviour in a year could sometimes not be recognisable. With [a Therapeutic Thinking](#) approach, the key is to provide a safe environment in your Unit for your students to be accepted.

It might be that this case would benefit from referring back to Children's Services to request the provision of counselling sessions. As for the sexual references, it would be useful to identify the root cause or source by asking questions about their home and online life and then work to counterbalance its impact through a review of your RSHE curriculum.

Remember the age and stage of development for this student. They are in the middle of adolescence and their hormones will impact their behaviours/response. .

Parental / key trusted adult involvement if available could also have a significant impact.

Scenario 3

Issue

I am a youth worker working with vulnerable teenagers with special educational needs, particularly within the autistic spectrum classification. One particular case of concern is of a 17-year-old male who has displayed harmful sexual behaviour (masturbating in a lounge in front of others) and is accused of making sexual advances toward another student in a college. Their response was, "It was a game".

Police were involved but decided to take no further action. I referred this case to the local Safeguarding Hub, and they feel the safeguarding measures proposed by the college are adequate. What else can I do?

Response

Have a professionals' meeting with the safeguarding lead at the college to discuss your concerns. Understand what the safeguarding measures referred to by the Safeguarding Hub are and contribute to the monitoring of this.

There may be more happening than you are not aware of. These measures should be over and above the PSHE curriculum put in place by the college. If, despite you working collaboratively with the college, the situation does not improve, this case should be referred back to the Safeguarding Hub. If possible, do this in collaboration with the college safeguarding lead.

A four stages process should be followed (refer to Making an Effective Referral resource):

- (1) Detailed records of the behaviours and incidents to date should be clearly documented.
- (2) Explain the interventions made so far and the impact on the young person and behaviour.
- (3) Clearly detail the action you want the Safeguarding Hub to take to safeguard the child/family and others.
- (4) Outline the potential consequences of the young person not receiving specialist support.

Scenario 4

Issue

We have a young person who is under investigation by the police for sexual offences. We think they need some support as they are not coping very well. Are we allowed to refer them to counselling or support services?

Response

Yes, you can. It would be a violation of their human rights not to offer support when it is needed. [The Crown Prosecution Service has clear processes for 'pre-trial therapy'](#), which sets out the parameters in situations like this. Further information can be found on their website.

It is important to inform the investigating officer that this is taking place. You should also tell the person that is conducting the counselling that a live investigation is currently underway and that any notes from the session will be disclosed to the court if the case goes to trial.

Scenario 5

Issue

A child in Year 2 has been exhibiting some concerning behaviours and other children have reported feeling uncomfortable around the child. These behaviours include exposing other children's underwear by pulling down trousers and lifting up skirts.

One girl has reported that on two occasions the child has led her to a quiet private space and tried to touch her under her underwear, when she protested the child said it was ok and that it would be their secret.

We have started working with the child, specifically looking at the NSPCC PANTS resource. We are also planning to talk to the child's parents. Is there anything else we need to consider?

Response

The behaviour is not only age inappropriate but indicates that there may be a wider safeguarding issue at play here. It is very possible that the child is acting out abuse that they have been victim to.

We would recommend making a safeguarding referral to your local Children's Social [services](#) so they can carry out an assessment to determine what might be the cause of this behaviour in school.

Scenario 6

Issue

A young (14 years) person in our care facility has been displaying harmful sexual behaviour and when checking with the school and previous care settings it appears this behaviour has been ongoing for a few years.

The behaviour involves persistent touching and masturbation in public settings such as the communal living room. Workers have found underwear in their room that belong to other children in our setting and have been taken without consent.

The young person has also been found to be communicating with lots of people online, arranging to meet up for sex, sending nudes and uploading these to porn websites. We have restricted their online use and have put measures in place to monitor what they do online, we have also had many conversations with them about the inappropriateness of their behaviour, how it affects others and what the impacts could be on their safety.

We have worked through resources to help but all these interventions have had little effect on their behaviour, which is still problematic and persistent. We feel we have exhausted all our resource and are not able to handle this within our setting. We have therefore made referrals to social care for help and support but so far these referrals have been rejected for not meeting the threshold for intervention. What other avenues are available to us?

Response

It does sound like a referral to social care would be the best next step in responding to this behaviour. It might be that the referrals submitted so far have not been detailed enough.

You may find it useful to access our document on [Making an Effective Referral](#) to help guide you through this practice. If the child already has a social worker, you can also update them on this behaviour and ask for their help to ensure the child receives the appropriate support.