

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Definition

Harmful sexual behaviour involves one or more children engaging in or being engaged by others in any kind of sexual activity or sexual act that is inappropriate for their age, understanding and/or stage of development.

These behaviours and activities can range from using sexually explicit words that may indicate inappropriate knowledge and experience, to full penetrative sex with other children or adults that could be harmful to either party; that may be illegal and may, dependent on the age of the child or young person, result in criminal offences being committed.

Young people (below the age of eighteen years) who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, over whom they have power by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength or intellect (and where the other individual in this relationship may have suffered harm), may also be the perpetrator or victim of sexual exploitation and betrayal of trust.

Sexual activity includes sexual intercourse (oral, anal or vaginal), sexual touching, exposure of sexual organs, showing or being exposed to pornographic material, exhibitionism, voyeurism, obscene communication, frottage, fetishism and talking in a sexualised way that is distressing or harmful to others. We should also consider any form of sexual activity with an animal and where a young person sexually abuses an adult as potentially harmful to both the perpetrator and the victim.

Sexualised behaviours that are harmful are considered to fall outside of what would be deemed to be safe and or healthy for the young person or child/ren involved.

Sexually harmful behaviours may and are often likely to include elements of:

- Coercion;
- Secrecy;
- Power imbalance possibly involving significant difference in age and developmental factors;
- Degradation and threats;
- Compulsive behaviours;
- Age inappropriate knowledge or experience;
- Use of bribes, gifts and removal of inhibitors, for instance through the use of drugs or alcohol.

Risks and Features to be Aware of

- It is estimated that up to two thirds of contact [Sexual Abuse](#) is committed by peers;
- History of [Abuse](#), [Neglect](#) and especially sexual abuse, can contribute to a child displaying harmful sexual behaviour; and increases their propensity to becoming a perpetrator of harmful sexualised behaviour and youth offending;
- A large proportion of children and young people who behave in a harmful sexualised manner suffer from learning difficulties and language and communication difficulties;
- All children, involved in inappropriate sexualised behaviour - including the instigator of the behaviour, need to be viewed as victims;
- Children have greater access to information about sex through technology and this has had an impact on their attitudes to sex and sexual behaviour;
- Children with harmful sexual behaviours who receive adequate treatment are less likely to go on to commit abuse as an adult compared to children who receive no support;
- Denial of sexualised behaviour in children is not a barrier to successful interventions and is not a predictor of the risk or likelihood of 're-offending';
- Incidents of harmful sexual behaviour should be dealt with under Force and National Safeguarding Processes and Policies. It should be recognised that both the child protection and safeguarding needs of the victim and potentially criminal element to the behaviour needs to be addressed. There should be a coordinated approach between the agencies;
- The needs of the children and young people should be considered separately from the needs of their victims;
- It should be recognised that there might be areas of unmet developmental needs, attachment problems, special educational needs and disabilities may all be relevant in understanding the onset and development of abusive behaviour;
- The family context is also relevant to understanding behaviour and assessing risk.

One model which seeks to organise thinking around harmful sexualised behaviour is known as Finkelhor's Four Stage model which suggests that four pre-conditions are likely to be in place before a deliberately abusive act takes place. Interruption at any stage may prevent abuse taking place.

The stages are:

1. Motivation to sexually abuse - this can arise from a number of sources which vary with the individual;
2. Overcoming Internal Inhibitions - most young people who sexually abuse are aware of the taboos against this behaviour, yet because of their experiences or a specific set of circumstances, they can overcome these;
3. Overcoming external inhibitions - this can include grooming the victim and involve creating the physical opportunity to commit the offence;
4. Overcoming the resistance of the child - the offender will employ a variety of methods to commit the offence and equally important keep the victim quiet. These may include bribery, threats or other forms of coercion. This fourth variable is not essential since many abusive acts are not consensual and will frequently involve some level of resistance from the victim or an imbalance in the 'willingness' of both parties to engage in the act.

Exploring behaviour using this model may help open up discussion and avoid the pitfalls of falling into asking too many "why" questions. Instead, open questions should be used such as 'tell me', 'explain to me', 'describe to me'.

Indicators

There are no definitive diagnostic indicators in personal or family functioning that indicate a pre-disposition towards sexual offending although the following characteristics have been found in the background of some young people who sexually offend:

- Attachment disorders - poor nurturing and parental guidance;
- [Domestic Violence and Abuse](#);
- Previous sexual victimisation - a younger age at the onset of the abuse is more likely to lead to sexualised behaviour;
- Social rejection and loneliness;
- Poor empathy skills;
- Learning disability;
- Exposure to sexualised behaviour in adults or exposure to sexualised material such as pornography and e-communications with predatory adults;

- Skewed boundaries and dysfunctional roles and relationships within families.

Many of these factors exist alongside typical family environments where other forms of abuse are present, particularly when families have been exposed to sexual offending or lack of age appropriate and sexual boundaries.

There is a significant cohort of young people who display this behaviour who have varying levels of learning and social developmental needs. Their needs must be carefully assessed as some assessment tools are unsuitable and not geared towards individual ability or experience. Also, in most cases any assessment and intervention will need to be extended and involve a high degree of coordination between agencies.

Protection and Action to be Taken

Incidents of harmful sexual behaviour come to light, either through discovery or disclosure, which may be third-party or second-hand information. Indications that sexual abuse may be an issue can sometimes arise out of health issues and medicals for unconnected reasons. Should concerns be raised or disclosed then the Force and National Safeguarding Policy and Process should be followed.