

A Guide to Identifying, Understanding and Responding to Potentially Harmful Sexual Behaviours in Children and Young People



Introduction

Knowing how to identify and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people helps adults to support the development of healthy sexuality and protect young people from harm or abuse.

Sexuality is integral to a person's identity and develops throughout life. It is natural for children and young people to express their sexuality through their behaviour. Healthy sexual behaviour may be expressed in a variety of ways and relates to the stage of development. Sexual behaviours are not just about sex. They include any talk, touch, questions, conversations and interests which relate to sexuality and relationships.

When children or young people display sexual behaviour which increases their vulnerability or causes harm to another, adults have a responsibility to take action to provide support and protection.

Children and young people who have a disability, have been abused or have experienced other disruptions to their development or socialisation, may be at increased risk of exposure to, or of developing, unsafe or harmful sexual behaviours. Adults who care for these young people have a duty of care to provide relevant information and support.

What is the behaviour? **green, amber or red?**

1. Identify

Sexual development is influenced by many factors. The environment in which children grow, develop and interact has a significant influence on their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. When using the Traffic Lights framework to establish whether the sexual behaviour of children or young people is normal, concerning or harmful, it is necessary to consider the current social, cultural and familial context.

The chart that accompanies this leaflet lists specific examples of green, orange and red light behaviours at various ages. These are examples only and must be considered in context. Take into account the age and ability level of the child, young person and others involved as well as the location, frequency and nature of the behaviour. Use the Traffic Lights framework to identify the characteristics of the behaviour and the way it occurs and then follow steps 2 and 3 to understand and respond. All green, orange and red behaviours require some level of information, support and protective response.

What the behaviour is telling you?

2. Understand

Children show their needs and wants through their behaviours. Understanding the reason behind a child's sexual behaviour is important. When children or young people do not have the language, experience or ability to seek help, adults must look carefully at the behaviour to interpret it.

When sexual behaviours are identified as concerning or harmful, it is essential to think about why the child or young person is exhibiting the behaviour. Reviewing the behaviour and the way it happens will help you understand what is going on for the child and indicate what is needed.

0 – 4 years

5 - 9 years

10 - 13 years

14 – 17 years

RED

Sexual behaviours which indicate / cause harm because they are:

excessive, compulsive, coercive, forceful, degrading or threatening secretive, manipulative or involve bribery or trickery not appropriate for the age and stage of development between children with a significant difference in age, developmental ability or power

These behaviours signal a need for immediate protection and follow up support.

- compulsive masturbation of a persistent nature or duration
- persistent explicit sexual themes in talk, art or play
- disclosure of sexual abuse
- simulation of sexual touch or activity
- persistently touching the genitals /private parts of others
- forcing other children into sexual activity
- sexual behaviour between young children - penetration with objects, masturbation of others, oral sex
- sexually transmitted infection

- compulsive masturbation - self harming, exhibitionism
- disclosure of sexual abuse
- persistent sexual aggression – pulling /lifting/removing other children's clothes, sexually threatening notes / art / texts
- sexual behaviour with significantly younger or less able children
- accessing the rooms of sleeping children to engage in sexual activity
- simulation of / participation in, sexual activities - oral sex or intercourse
- sexually transmitted infections
- persistent sexual activity with animals
- use of mobile / social media to give out identifying details or sexual images

- compulsive masturbation - self harming, exhibitionism
- grooming vulnerable others for sex
- force or coercion of others into sex
- oral sex/sex with a person of different age, developmental ability or peer grouping
- STD or pregnancy
- Sending/publishing sexual images of self or another person
- face to face meeting with an online acquaintance
- sexual contact with animals
- exchanging sex for money or goods
- possessing, accessing or sending explicit images of children

- compulsive masturbation - self harming, exhibitionism
- pre-occupation with sexually aggressive and/or illegal pornography
- sexual contact with others of significant age and/or developmental difference
- grooming others for sex
- sending/publishing sexual images of another person without their consent
- meeting an online acquaintance without the knowledge of a peer / adult
- sexual contact with animals
- exchanging sex for money or goods
- forcing or manipulating others into sex
- possessing, accessing or sending explicit images of children

AMBER

Sexual behaviours which cause concern because of:

persistence, intensity, frequency or duration of behaviours the type of activity or knowledge for the age and stage of development inequality in age, size, power or developmental ability risk to the health and safety of the child or others unusual changes in a child's behaviour

These behaviours signal a need to monitor and provide extra support.

- masturbation in preference to other activities
- preoccupation with sexual behaviours
- persistently watching others in sexual activity, toileting or when naked
- explicit sexual talk, art or play
- following others into private spaces e.g. toilets, bathrooms to look at or touch them
- pulling other children's pants down or skirts up against their will
- touching the genitals/private parts of other children in preference to other activities
- attempting to touch or touching adults on the breasts, bottom, or genitals in ways that are persistent and/or invasive
- touching the genitals of animals after redirection

- compulsive masturbation - self harming, seeking an audience
- explicit talk, art or play of sexual nature
- persistent questions about sexuality despite being answered
- persistent nudity and/or exhibitionism
- persistently watching / following others to look at or touch them
- pulling other children's pants down or skirts up against their will
- persistent sexually flirtatious behaviour
- precocious with other children or adults
- touching genitals of animals after redirection
- use of social media with known / unknown people including giving out identifying details

- compulsive masturbation - self harming, exhibitionism
- talk, art or play which is sexual or sexually intimidating
- accessing movies, games, internet with sexually explicit content
- persistent fear of STD or pregnancy
- changes to behaviour e.g. flirting with older adult, seeking relationships with older children or adults in preference to peers
- engaging in sexual activities with an unknown peer e.g. deep kissing, mutual masturbation
- oral sex and/or sex with a known partner of similar age and developmental ability
- use of social media with unknown people including giving out identifying details

- preoccupation with sex interferes with life
- intentional spying on others while they are engaged in sexual activity or nudity
- communications, art or actions which are obscene or sexually intimidating
- exhibitionism with peers e.g. flashing
- unsafe sexual behaviour, including unprotected sex, sex while drunk, multiple / frequent change of partner
- STD or unplanned pregnancy
- oral sex and/or sex with known partner of more than two years age difference or significant difference in development
- meeting with an online acquaintance accompanied by a peer or known adult
- use of social media to send / receive sexual images of another person with their consent

GREEN

Sexual behaviours which are part of normal and healthy development and are:

spontaneous, curious, light hearted, easily diverted, enjoyable, mutual and consensual appropriate to the child's age and development among equals in terms of age, size and ability about understanding and gathering information, balanced with curiosity about other parts of life

These behaviours provide a chance to talk, explain and support

- comfortable when naked
- body touching and holding own genitals
- unselfconscious masturbation
- interest in body parts and functions
- wanting to touch familiar children's genital during play, toilet or bath times
- participation in make believe games involving looking at and/or touching the bodies of familiar children e.g. "show me yours and I'll show you mine", playing 'family'
- asking about or wanting to touch the breasts, bottoms or genitals of familiar adults e.g. when in the bath

- increased sense of privacy about bodies
- body touching / holding own genitals
- masturbation, usually with awareness of privacy
- curiosity about other children's genitals involving looking at and/or touching the bodies of familiar children e.g. "show me yours and I'll show you mine", playing 'family'
- curiosity e.g. questions about babies, gender, relationships, sexual activity
- telling stories or asking questions, using swear words, 'toilet' words or names for private parts
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers

- growing need for privacy
- masturbation in private
- curiosity and seeking information about sexuality
- use of sexual language
- interest and/or participation in girlfriend or boyfriend relationships
- hugging, kissing, touching with known peers
- exhibitionism amongst same age peers
- within the context of play e.g. occasional flashing or mooning
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with known peers

- need for privacy
- masturbation in private
- accessing information about sexuality
- viewing materials for sexual arousal e.g. music videos, magazines, movies
- sexually explicit conversations and/or use of humour and obscenities with peers
- interest and/or participation in a one on one relationship with someone of the same or other sex
- sexual activity with a partner of similar age and developmental ability (ability to consent must be considered)
- use of mobile phones and internet in relationships with peers

Asking Questions?

Q1. What are the issues or concerns regarding the child or young person and their behaviour?

Q2. What might these concerns indicate?

- Lack of accurate information on sexuality
- Boredom or loneliness
- Curiosity
- Sexual excitement
- Difficulties with social understanding
- Learning Disabilities / Difficulties
- Conflict in relationships
- Confusion about sexuality, relationships and sexual activities
- Lack of rules and consequences
- Lack of information about the risks of the behaviour
- Overexposure to explicit sexual activity and materials
- Lack of adult supervision and support
- Experience of physical, emotional or sexual abuse or neglect
- Lack of consistency across environments
- Anxiety about adult or family relationships

Understanding the child or young person and the issues that may be contributing to the behaviour guides the planning of effective responses.

Expressing sexuality through behaviour is natural, healthy and a basic aspect of being human. Sexual behaviour which makes children or young people vulnerable or causes harm to another requires adult intervention to provide support and protection.

All children and young people have the right to be safe.



What do you think?

green, amber or red?

Use the traffic lights to identify these scenarios

1. Harry, aged 8, masturbates for most of the day at school. When masturbating he will often expose his penis to the rest of the class.
2. Teekai, aged 13, spends a lot of time alone in his bedroom with the door shut. When his mum knocks on the door he tells her to go away. Lately he is putting his sheets and pyjamas into the washing basket to be washed every morning.
3. Gayle, aged 12, often tries to sit on the lap of her mum's male friends. When she does, she will talk about their bodies and say that it is OK for them to kiss her. Sometimes she likes to dance for them and says she is being a pop star.
4. Alex, aged 15, spends lots of time chatting to friends on the internet. Recently, Alex made a new friend, 'Sexy Boy', online. The more they chat, the more Alex feels attracted to 'Sexy Boy' and thinks about making a time to meet him in person. Alex talks to a friend about it.
5. Marley and Ashmita, both aged 4, are playing in the cubby house and have both taken their underpants off. They are looking at and touching each other's genitals.
6. Harper, aged 7 tells her teacher that she has seen Lucas, aged 13, touching her best friend Cindi's vagina.
7. Tilly, aged 16, is overheard telling her close friends about having intercourse and oral sex with her boyfriend. He is a 17 year old at the same school. She tells them that she enjoys it.

Social Media

Being online is now often a normal part of children's life at school and home. Children and young people can learn new things, get help with homework, express themselves creatively and connect with friends and family.

There are also risks, but by understanding and talking about the dangers we can help keep children and young people be safe online. Children and young people may regularly engage in activities such as:

- ✓ Searching for information or content on search engines like Google and Bing
- ✓ Using social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter.
- ✓ Sharing images and watching videos through websites or mobile apps like Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Vine and YouTube
- ✓ Writing or replying to messages on forums and message boards
- ✓ Playing games alone or with others through websites, apps or game consoles

Preventing children and young people from using the internet or mobile phones won't keep them safe in the long run, so it's important to have conversations that help them understand how to stay safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.

There is a wide variety of resources available online to support educating children and young people of all ages to stay safe online. A number of these can be found in the NSCB CSE Toolkit and are suitable for a variety of ages. The Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) E-safety Officer can also help in raising awareness and providing support.



For further information view

<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety>

The NSPCC suggests the following ways to help keep children safe on the internet and social networks:

- It's easier to have conversations about online safety little and often, rather than trying to cover everything at once.
- As children get older, and technology changes, keep talking about what they're doing online and how to stay safe.
- Encourage children and young people to show adults at school and home their favourite things to do online, and show an interest in what they do – just like you would offline. This gives you a way to support and encourage them while learning and opportunities to discuss any concerns.
- Ensure that young people and children understand that it's easy for people to lie about themselves online, for example, their age or gender, because they have never met them.
- Set rules and agree boundaries such as sharing images and videos and how to treat people online and not post anything they wouldn't say face-to-face.
- Check they know how to use privacy settings and reporting tools and remind them to keep their personal information private on games and social media websites.
- Talk to young people about what to do if they see content or are contacted by someone that worries or upsets them. Make sure they know how to use tools to report abuse.

Taking Action

Most sexual behaviours are normal and healthy and will be in the green category. Green light behaviours present opportunities to communicate with children and young people about healthy sexuality.

Amber or red light behaviours are less common. They indicate the need to pay attention, monitor, supervise, provide sexuality and personal safety education and may also require therapy, protection from harm or a legal response which should be dealt with by way of a referral to Northamptonshire MASH.

Where amber or red behaviours are identified, in conjunction with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) for your organisation and the Northamptonshire Thresholds and Pathways document you should decide on the best course of action. If you require help or advice MASH and Early help advisors can be contacted on 0300 126 1000. Before contacting you should have worked through this document and the traffic light tool and completed any internal assessment that will aid discussions

Early Help Assessment

In some instances an Early Help Assessment will be the most appropriate course of action to ensure that any potential harmful behaviour is addressed with the appropriate multi agency support for a child and family.

Safeguarding Referral

Some children with complex needs will be defined as being 'in need' as defined in the Children's Act 1986. Those children will need to be referred to the MASH by completing a MASH Referral form. A decision will then be made whether or not an initial assessment should be carried out by a Social Worker.

If you have concerns that a child may be being sexually exploited. You must complete the NSCB CSE Risk Assessment as part of the referral to MASH. This can be found in the NSCB CSE Toolkit.

3. Respond

What you can do to address the child's needs?

All behaviour has a function. When adults understand the reason for certain behaviour they can respond appropriately. any strategies may be required to respond to children with concerning or harmful behaviours. It is also important to address the needs of the people who have an impact on their lives e.g. family, carers, teachers and support workers. Strategies for meeting the need could include:

- give accurate facts and information about sexuality
- teach social skills
- support healthy friendships and relationships
- teach about privacy and make home and other environments private and safe
- make clear rules and reinforce them with praise or consequences
- have consistency between homes, family, school, community
- supervise during times of risk
- monitor behaviour and review support strategies
- restrict access to previous victims or vulnerable others and explain why
- limit time spent with people who bully or who also show concerning sexual behaviours
- remove from situations where risk of harm, exploitation, abuse or neglect is suspected
- check for infections or injuries and get medical attention if needed
- provide information and support to family, carers and staff
- get family counselling or therapy referral to other services

Relationships and sexuality education encourages open and clear communication to provide a foundation for the development of healthy sexual behaviours and attitudes.

Topics for education may include:

- body parts
- being private
- personal safety
- puberty
- managing periods
- types of touch
- relationships
- safe sex
- reproductive health
- contraception
- sexual abuse issues
- sexual health checks
- sexual functioning
- self esteem and feelings
- decision making

How serious is the behaviour?

If the answer to any of the following is yes, adults have a duty of care to take action.

The behaviour:

- × is against the law
- × is against organisational policy
- × is of concern to others
- × provides a potential risk to the child
- × provides a potential risk to others
- × interferes with the child's relationships
- × is life threatening

Sexual behaviour and the law

There are many different laws relating to aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviour.

- × Sexual activity must be voluntary and mutually agreed by those involved.
- × The age of consent sexual intercourse varies from 16 to 18 depending on circumstances.
- × A person must be able to consent to sexual activity. Age, intellectual and psychological ability to understand and give full permission is taken into account. This includes being intoxicated by drugs or alcohol.
- × Incest or sexual activity between close family members is against the law. Close family members could include defacto, step, foster and biological relatives.
- × Taking, sharing, selling, storing or posting online sexual images of a person under the age of 18 is against the law.
- × Children from 10 years old can be charged for sexually abusing others. Their ability to understand their actions is taken into account when working out if they can be liable.

Summary of framework

- ❖ Basic sex education (PHSE)
- ❖ Universal response (traffic light)
- ❖ Early Help Assessment
- ❖ Assessment & intervention for additional needs e.g. cognitive assessment
- ❖ Targeted work (e.g. NSPCC 'Pants Rule' / Protective Behaviours)
- ❖ Services relating to trauma / conduct disorders
- ❖ Statutory assessment
- ❖ Referral, Assessment & Intervention Service (RAIS)
- ❖ YOS – AIM2 trained staff
- ❖ Specialist commissioned assessments / interventions
- ❖ Children removed from families as a result of behaviours & placed into care / specialist provision