

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

Background: HSB are sexual behaviours expressed by children/young people under 18 (CYP) that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self/others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult.

(Hackett et al, 2019)

“Technology assisted HSB (TA-HSB) is sexualised behaviour using the internet or mobile phones and includes viewing pornography or indecent images of children or sexting.”

(NSPCC)

Why It Matters: In the UK, around a third of sex offences against CYP are committed by under 18s (Hackett 2014). In Jersey, between 2014-2016, 23% of all sexual offences were committed by those under 18 (FOI). Existing indicators suggest that HSB is a considerable social problem that is under-reported and may have serious negative impacts upon not only those impacted by HSB, but also the CYP who display the behaviours as well as their families and wider communities.

Consider: Do you use the Brook Traffic Light Tool (https://legacy.brook.org.uk/brook_tools/traffic/Brook_Traffic_Light_Tool.pdf) to help you consider the continuum of sexual behaviour in CYP? Is non-judgemental, non-stigmatising information and advice available to CYP and their parents/carers? Is it accessible by a range of cultures/literacy levels? Do you intervene early and avoid drift and delay to undertake preventative work and increase the possibility of good outcomes?

What To Do: Early intervention is essential; identifying behaviours at the lower end of the continuum and/or responding to low-level HSB in early childhood can help stop more serious behaviour in adolescence. A referral to the Children and Families Hub should be made where there are concerns about the welfare and safety of children including those impacted by harmful sexual behaviour, those alleged to have displayed harmful sexual behaviour and any other children (SPB Child Procedures online). Parental support is important in promoting engagement & successful outcomes.



Most CYP who display HSB don't go on to become adult offenders. Empowering parents to teach their children to be safe online rather than restricting online activity enables CYP to engage constructively online and build resilience. Non-stigmatising, non-judgemental information and advice for CYP and families must be easily accessible. Under or overreaction by agencies can happen when developmental and behavioural pathways of CYP are misunderstood.

Information: Most CYP displaying HSB are male although girls can also display HSB.

Indicators of HSB include attachment disorders, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), poor nurturing and parental guidance, neglect, 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, social and communication skills or a developmental disorder.

Imprecise and vague terminology can lead to inappropriately labelling of CYP so a shared and meaningful range of terms is important to enable clear communication and accurate assessment.

A continuum model (Hackett 2010) is used to demonstrate the range of sexual behaviours from those that are developmentally typical, to problematic, to harmful. The Brook Traffic Light tool supports professionals to identify behaviour, understand what the behaviour is communicating and respond appropriately.