Training Resource

About Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Definitions. What are the different forms of harmful sexual behaviour children and young people experience?

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive[1].

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse is a form of HSB where sexual abuse takes place between children of a similar age or stage of development.

Child-on-child sexual abuse is a form of HSB that takes place between children of any age or stage of development.

Problematic sexual behaviour (PSB) is developmentally inappropriate or socially unexpected, sexualised behaviour without an overt element of victimisation or abuse.

What is the extent of it? The Ofsted rapid review of sexual abuse undertaken in 2021 found that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse were the two issues most commonly experienced and talked about by children and young people.

A world of name calling and image sharing

Among the most commonly reported behaviours were: sexist name-calling and comments; and being sent or coerced into sharing sexual images. This was targeted mainly at girls.

Teachers and leaders underestimate the issue Many children and young people said teachers don't 'know the reality' of their lives or are 'out of date'. They reported much higher incidences of sexual harassment, online sexual abuse and bullying behaviours than teachers and leaders were aware of.

Singled out because of sexual orientation LGBTQ+ children and young people reported a particularly big gap between staff's knowledge of incidents and their daily experience of harmful sexual behaviour.

Online harassment impacts culture Overall, children and young people tended to say they felt physically safe at college or school, although there was a clear emotional impact on girls who experienced regular sexual harassment or other harmful sexual behaviour. Some school leaders defined online sexual harassment as 'happening out of school'. However, the review found evidence of how online sexual harassment had a significant impact on the normalisation of harmful sexual behaviour and unhealthy cultures within school.

Young people reported not feeling safe in other friends' homes when parties were held or in parks and on buses. There appear to be ample opportunities for images to be taken and used or shared later.

Not telling adults who could help

Children and young people explained why they did not report sexual harassment and violence. Their reasons included: not knowing what would happen if they did.

Their concerns included:

- 'reputational damage' such as being ostracised from a social group or damage to a sexual reputation
- adults' reactions, including feeling judged or blamed
- confidentiality and not knowing what will be done with the information
- feeling there was 'no point' in reporting - it was so commonplace
- feelings of embarrassment or shame in talking to someone of a different generation about sex.

Ofsted comments that:
'The prevalence of children and young people seeing explicit material they do not want to see and being pressured to send 'nudes' is a much wider problem than schools can address.'

Girls said that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send nude pictures ('nudes'), are much more prevalent than adults realise.

Sharing sexual images

Nearly 90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.

Sexist name calling

92% of girls, and 74% of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. The frequency of these harmful sexual behaviours means that some children and young people consider them normal.

Education

'Children and young people were rarely positive about the RSHE they had received. They felt that it was too little, too late and that the curriculum was not equipping them with the information and advice they needed to navigate the reality of their lives. Because of these gaps, they told us they turned to social media or their peers to educate each other, which understandably made some feel resentful. As one girl put it, 'It shouldn't be our responsibility to educate boys'.'

Schools' responses

'Professionals consistently underestimated the prevalence of online sexual abuse, even when there was a proactive whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment and violence.'

What do the definitions describe?

Peer-on-peer sexual abuse

The term 'peer-on-peer' sexual abuse includes:

- sexual violence, such as rape, assault by penetration and sexual assault
- sexual harassment, such as sexual comments, remarks, jokes and online sexual harassment, which may be

stand-alone or part of a broader pattern of abuse
- upskirting, which typically involves taking a picture under a person's clothing without them knowing, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks to obtain sexual gratification, or to cause the victim humiliation, distress or alarm
- sexting (also known as 'youth-produced sexual imagery')[footnote 4]

Peer on peer abuse online

Includes:

- receiving unsolicited explicit photographs or videos, for example 'dick pics'
- sending, or being pressured to send, nude and semi-nude photographs or videos ('nudes')
- being sent or shown solicited or unsolicited online explicit material, such as pornographic videos

Platforms and power dynamics

Typical platforms for sharing material between peers tended to be WhatsApp or Snapchat.

There may be power dynamics, age imbalances and other aspects of an incident that would warrant further investigation.

Harmful sexual behaviour

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.

Language should be sensitive

Not all who experience this abuse see themselves as a victim.

Perpetrators

Any child or young person who exhibits harmful sexual behaviour may need a safeguarding response or intervention. Professionals should respond with interventions that address the behaviour of the perpetrator, while also providing an appropriate level of support. Harmful sexual behaviour may be an indicator that the child has been abused.[footnote 7], [footnote 8]

Developmentally appropriate?

It is typical for children to display some sexualised behaviour as they grow up. But sometimes a child might display sexualised behaviour that is harmful to themselves and others.

NSPCC video
https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour/preventing

Walker, L. and Laugharne, C. (2016) Helping children to learn about safer sexual behaviour: taking steps to safety: a guide book. London: Speechmark.

The Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service
www.Swgfl.org.uk/harmful-sexual-behaviour-support-service/