

Understanding problematic and harmful sexual behaviours

Problematic and harmful sexual behaviours refers to a range of sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that vary in type and presentation and require different responses depending on context and impact.



Harmful sexual behaviours

Harmful sexual behaviours are those that:

- are developmentally inappropriate
- have caused or may cause, harm to the child or others
- may involve coercion, force, pressure, secrecy, fear, or power imbalance
- may be abusive in nature.

Harmful sexual behaviours often require a specialist response, with a clear focus on safety, assessment, and coordinated support.

Examples of harmful sexual behaviours:

- Sexual behaviour involving coercion or force.
- Significant developmental or age differences, or power imbalance, between children.
- Behaviour that causes fear, distress, or harm to another person.
- Persistent or escalating sexual behaviours with increasing levels of risk.



Helpful responses

Adults can approach problematic and harmful sexual behaviours by:

- staying calm and curious when sexual behaviours are observed
- considering the child's developmental stage and context, rather than the behaviour alone
- responding early with clear, consistent and developmentally appropriate boundaries
- helping children understand privacy, consent, and appropriate settings
- supporting families and carers to respond in a consistent, non-shaming way
- seeking advice and support early when needed.



Problematic sexual behaviours

Problematic sexual behaviours are those that:

- Sit outside what would be expected for a child's age or developmental stage, or
- May be developmentally expected, but are
 - displayed in the wrong context
 - happening too frequently
 - impacting on others safety or wellbeing
 - may not involve intent to harm
 - often reflect gaps in understanding, exposure, or regulation

These behaviours require a proactive, early, and supportive response from the child's parents, carers and other key adults in the child's life.

Examples of problematic sexual behaviours:

- Repeated use of sexualised language beyond developmental understanding.
- Sexualised play or talk continuing in school despite support and redirection.
- Developmentally expected curiosity expressed in inappropriate group or public settings.
- Self-soothing behaviours (e.g. genital touching) occurring in public settings such as classrooms, even with adult support and redirection.

Helpful responses to problematic and harmful sexual behaviours will:

- Prioritise the safety of all children concerned, including involving child protection and other services as appropriate.
- Use age appropriate and developmentally appropriate language.
- Plan a conversation in a safe way (think about who is present, comfort level of child, where the conversation occurs, and timing).
- Be clear what was observed, or explained to you, (e.g. use correct names for body parts) and why the behaviour is not okay.
- Gently explain the impact the behaviour may have upon others.
- Give the child space to respond, validate their responses, recognising they may not yet understand their behaviour is not okay.
- Be mindful that some children might deny or minimise the behaviour due to things like fear, shame, embarrassment. This may indicate they need time, safety, and support to help them talk about it.
- Listen actively, ask open ended questions, be supportive.
- Inform parents/ carers where it is safe to do so, and support them to have conversations about bodies, safety, privacy, and relationships.

Further information

Together We Can is currently being piloted. Public access to the site is expected to be available in coming months.

