

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) Awareness for Schools

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Aims

Understanding what constitutes harmful sexual behaviour, it's impact, and how it differentiates from healthy sexual development.

Gaining insight into risk factors for HSB, as well as the conditions may that trigger and maintain the behaviour.

Get an overview of sources of support, and useful tools and ideas for assessment and intervention.

Definition of HSB

'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 be abusive towards another child, young person, or adult'.

-Hackett 2014, Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours.

Problematic vs Abusive?

Problematic:

Does not include victimisation of others.

Potentially developmentally inappropriate and harmful to self or others. May be developmentally appropriate but expressed in inappropriate context.

Abusive:

Involve an element of coercion and power imbalance. More common in adolescence.

HSB can be used as umbrella term for both

What we know about HSB

About a third of all sexual offences against children in the UK involve other children as perpetrators (Hackett, 2016).

Sexual recidivism rates are low (around 10%). Most do not go on to become adults that sexually offend!

Most victims of HSB appear to be children known to the young person (Taylor, 2003). Approximately a third within families. Significant proportion occurs in institutional settings, such as schools.

More prevalent amongst boys (2-12% prevalence estimates for girls). Girls less likely to have convictions and tend to be younger than male counterparts.

Denial has no significant relationship with recidivism.

Risk Factors

Witnessing violence

Complex trauma (abuse and neglect)

Victimisation

Lack of boundaries

Attachment difficulties

Exposure to inappropriate sexual materials/ Witnessing sexual behaviour

Lack of adaptive self-soothing/emotional regulation skills

Intellectual/neurodevelopmental difficulties

Impaired social and communication skills

Different typologies/pathways, e.g. generalist vs HSB only

HSB in Schools

In the UK, Girlguiding (2017) found that 64% of 13-21 experienced sexual harassment in school or college. Similar studies from US suggest that peer on peer sexual assault high rates of sexual harassment and assaults occur on school grounds.

One child is raped in school on every school day, and in primary schools alone three sexual assaults are reported to the police every school day (Women and equalities select committees report, 2016)

9 out of 10 girls had received unsolicited images and been subject to sexist name calling in school (Ofsted, 2021).

Risk factors in school may relate to physical layout, student body, peer norms, staff training and conduct.

Impact upon mental health, class participation, attendance and grades.
Exclusion of the child displaying harmful behaviour.

Whole school approaches; policy, school culture, curriculum, physical locations, staff training, parent engagement, and multi-agency partnerships.

Prevention is essential!

Everyone's Safer

Lucy Faithful Foundation, 2025

3-year research project informed by work with 30 schools and stop it now helpline.

Student voice: Student voice: sexualised bullying common, online coercion major concern, fear of reporting, limited trust in school staff.

Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and pastoral staff operated under intense pressure in a high-stakes environment, often feeling isolated and under-supported.

64% of calls came from secondary settings (mainstream and special), with 27% from primary schools

62% were from DSLs. 75% of calls focused on individual student concerns; 21% related to wider school issues. Concerns peaked among 13–15-year-olds. 77% of cases involved behaviour displayed by boys

Provide professional development, practical tools, and support to teachers and safeguarding staff. Adopt whole-school, public health approaches. Shift from punitive to restorative strategies, balancing accountability with education. Include boys constructively in prevention, through gender-sensitive RSE and open dialogue.

HSB Underlying Needs

Attention/Recognition

Adulation

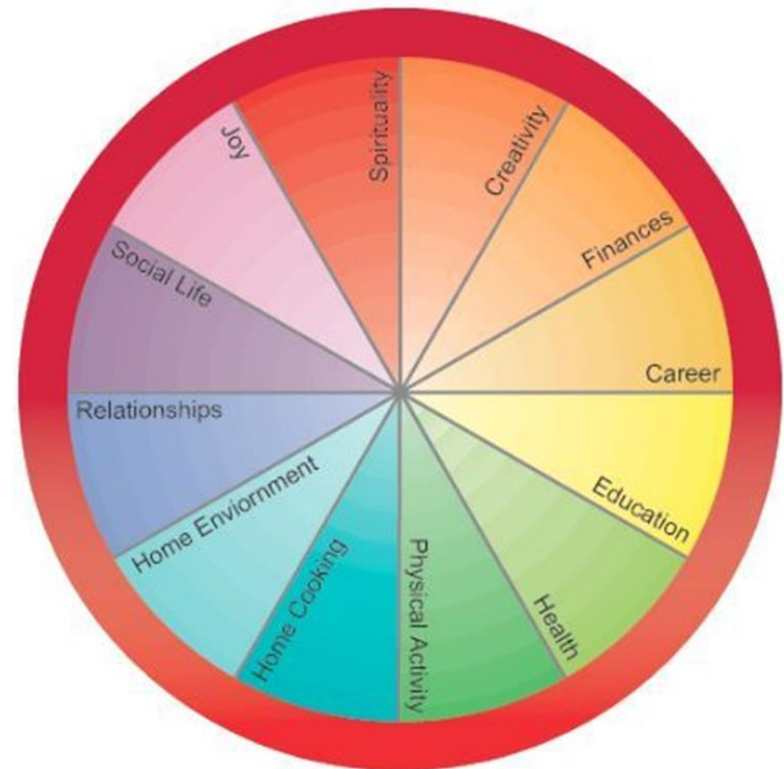
Self-satisfaction

Recognition/Sense of Achievement

Belonging and Connection

Exploration and Thrill-Seeking

Sexual Gratification/Emotion-
Regulation



Sexual Development in the Digital Age

Curiosity and sexual exploration as natural part of adolescent development

Triple Engine:

Accessibility, Affordability, Anonymity

Impact of COVID?

Research into this area is young and limited!



The Online World



POSITIVES

Source of entertainment, enjoyment, education and information.

It allows a direct connection to their friendship groups and support networks outside immediate proximity.

Talking about problems that they may find more difficult to talk about face to face/reducing isolation.

NEGATIVES

Additional sphere for exploitation, bullying, and victimisation.

Desensitisation to victim experiences.

Exposure to harmful sexual content

Limiting direct contact with peers/exposure to real life scenarios, particularly with prior social difficulties, e.g. ASD

Algorithms: internet rabbit holes

More difficult for parents to manage?

Pornography

Average age at which children see pornography is 13, 27% before 11

42 billion users per year, 115 million per day (increase since 2018)

UK second top user by traffic, BBC top search, followed by PornHub

UK (69% of users male)

Most people access through phones, some access through game consoles

Likelihood of accessing illegal/extreme content increases with frequency of use.

Viewing pornography influences young people's sexual views and extreme pornography linked to sexually coercive behaviour, may affect body image and sexual function

Physical violence towards women by men is prevalent in mainstream pornography (35-45%)

Hentai –sexualised anime –if act is illegal, still an illegal image

Sex Education

2020 –Legal requirement for all primary schools to teach relationships education and all secondary schools teach sex education.

Young People RSE poll 2021 -35% rated RSE as 'good' or 'very good'. 22% rated it as bad or very bad.

37% reported learning nothing about 'Power imbalances in relationships'.

36% had learnt nothing about pornography.

36% of young people had learnt nothing about sexual pleasure

33% didn't learn about how to access local sexual health services

17% of young people have had RSE at home in the form of regular talks or conversations. Young people's message for parents is to start earlier with more frequent, open and honest conversations.



Brook's Traffic Light System

Tool that categorises sexual behaviour from healthy to harmful

Make decisions about safeguarding

Assess and respond appropriately to sexual behaviour

Understand healthy sexual development and distinguish from harmful behaviour

Brook's Traffic Light System

What are Green Behaviours?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Between children of similar age and ability• Natural curiosity and exploration• Consensual and reciprocal	-Give positive feedback or information
What are Amber Behaviours?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unusual for the individual• Of potential concern, due to age or developmental differences• Of potential concern, due to activity type, frequency, duration or context at which they occur.	-Be curious and gather more information
What are Red Behaviours?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Excessive, secretive, compulsive, coercive, degrading or threatening• Involving significant age, developmental, or power differences• Of concern due to the activity type, frequency, duration or the context in which they occur	-Need for immediate action and intervention

Safety-Planning

Safety-plans should be proportionate.

Safety plans must consider contextual factors, e.g. how, when, what might happen, who might be around, when is it less likely to happen? Triggers for the behaviour? Consider victim safety. Should include what will happen if the plan isn't followed? The plan may need to include how to progressively build up to increased access.

Parental controls may be a good place to start, though cannot prevent all online HSB.

Relational power is generally more effective than coercive power.

May initially be restrictive (e.g. disabling wifi) until risks are better understood. However this is not a sustainable long-term measure and safety plans should be subject to regular reviews (multi-agency).

Collaborate with YP and family/educate adults.

Support the young person to make good choices –practice scenarios.

Underlying needs need to be understood and met in order to decrease risk.

SOCIAL

G	R	A	C	E	S
Gender Geography	Race Religion	Age (Dis) Ability Accent Appearance	Culture Class Care-experienced	Ethnicity Education Employment	Sexuality Sexual Orientation Spirituality Socio-economic status

AIM3 Assessment

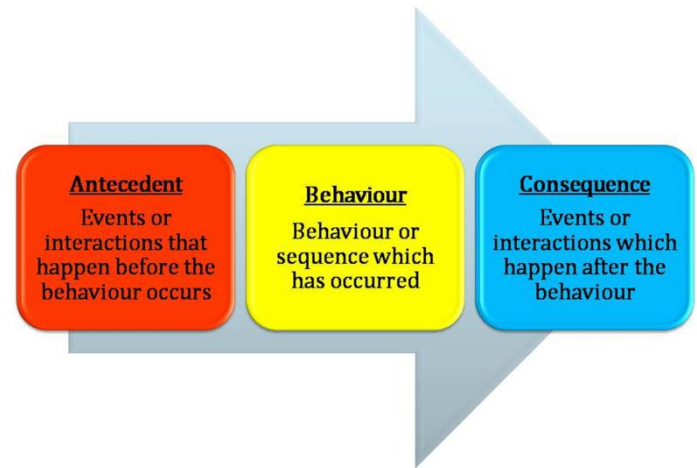
Separate assessment depending on age (over or under 12)

Structured framework for assessing risk of harm across 5 key domains: sexual behaviour, non-sexual behaviour, developmental, environment/family, self-regulation.

Each domain compiles evidence-based factors (static and dynamic) for risk and resilience.

Needs and risks are identified and forms the basis for effective intervention

Functional Behaviour Analysis



Antecedents:

Environmental factors, internal conditions, family scripts

Behaviour:

Intensity, frequency, duration

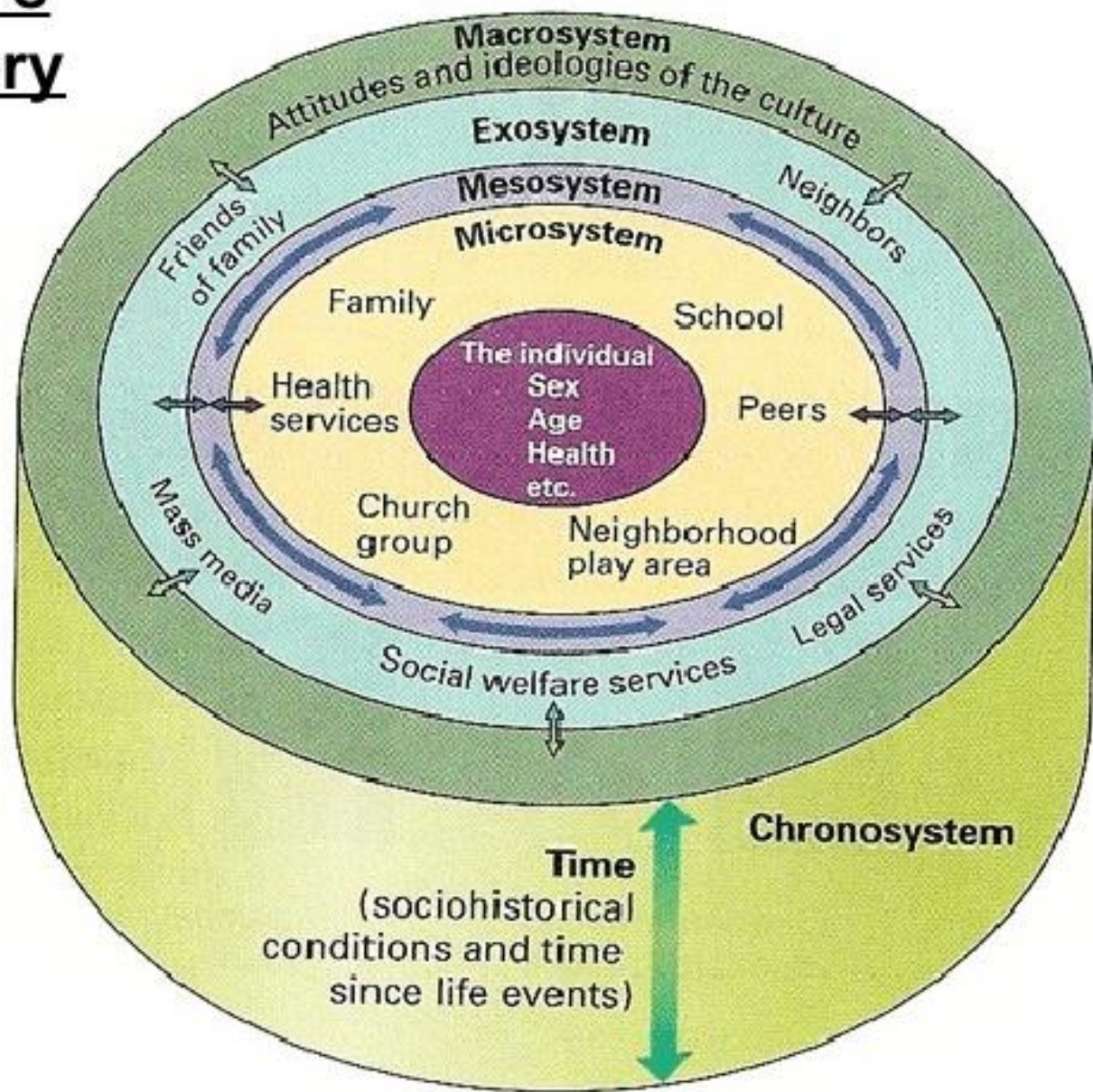
Consequences:

Positive vs. negative reinforcement

Zones of Regulation

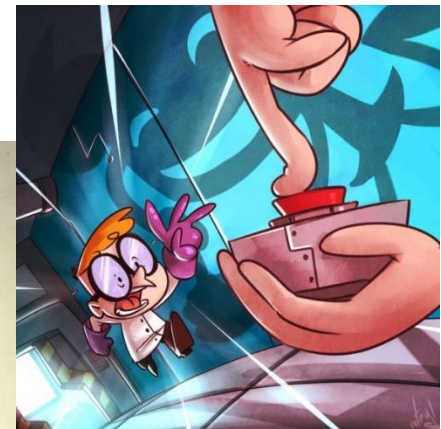
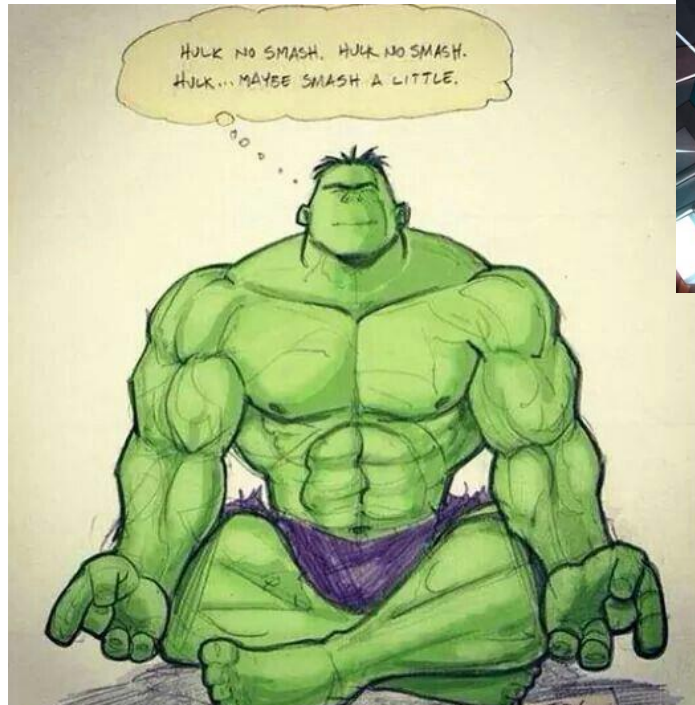
What Zone Are You In?			
Blue	Green	Yellow	Red
			
Sick Sad Tired Bored Moving Slowly	Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Ready to Learn	Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	Mad/Angry Mean Yelling/Hitting Disgusted Out of Control

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory



Thoughts about us Professionals

Emotional Impact of working with HSB



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- ☐ What were your family scripts in regards to sex and relationships growing up?
 - ☐ As a professional, how might your life story/worldview shape your work with children and young people?
 - ☐ How do you address the risk of bias and power imbalances that may affect interactions with the young person/family?

Self-Care

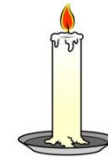
1. Physical



2. Psychological



3. Spiritual



4. Emotional



5. Professional



What can we do?

Use the traffic light to help understand behaviour/risks

Safety-planning

Consider necessary referrals

Consider whole school responses.

HSB forum in children's social care

NSPCC

HSB Forum

The Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) forum is open to professionals from across Children's Services. It takes place monthly on a Monday morning.

We can offer:

A reflective space to think through concerns

Support with identifying when AIM assessment is needed

Ideas for intervention, including practical tools and exercises to support work

A chance to think through the impact that HSB can have on us professionals

Checking out ideas with colleagues to help feel more confident in what you are already doing!

If you'd like to bring a case for discussion, please complete referral form and send it to aili.nidsjo@southwark.gov.uk or Nathan.williamson@southwark.gov.uk

Summary

HSB by children and adolescents account for a substantial proportion of sexual harm

Multiple pathways lead to HSB

Children and young people who display HSB are a heterogeneous group, substantially different from adults that sexually offend

HSB needs to be viewed within developmental context, with impact of behaviour considered

Interventions need to be proportionate, trauma-informed, ecological, and individually tailored

References

Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool adapted with permission from True Relationships & Reproductive Health. (2012). Traffic Lights guide to sexual behaviours in children and young people: identify, understand and respond. Brisbane: True Relationships & Reproductive Health, Australia.

Hackett, S, Branigan, P and Holmes, D (2019). Harmful sexual behaviour framework: an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours, second edition, London, NSPCC.

Hackett, S (2014). Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. London: Research in Practice.

Hackett, S (2010). Children, young people and sexual violence. In Barter, C and Berridge, D (eds) Children behaving badly? Exploring peer violence between children and young people. London: Blackwell Wiley.

Hollis, V. and Belton, E. (2017) Children and young people who engage in technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour; a study of their behaviours, backgrounds and characteristics. London: NSPCC.

NICE Harmful sexual behaviour among children and young people
<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/NG55>

Radford L, Corral S, Bradley C, Fisher H, Bassett C, Howat N and Collishaw S (2011) Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC.

Helpful Resources

Thinkuknow

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/articles/Harmful-sexual-behaviour/>

Talk Pants

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/support-for-parents/pants-underwear-rule/>

Brook Traffic Light Tool

<https://www.brook.org.uk/training/wider-professional-training/sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool/>

Support with safety-planning: https://www.childnet.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Supporting_Young_People_with_Harmful_Sexual_Behaviour_Online1.pdf

Information for Young People [Home - Shore \(shorespace.org.uk\)](https://shorespace.org.uk)

Community Safety resources

[Navigating Child Digital Safety | Insights From Netflix's Adolescence](#)

Everyone is invited

<https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/>

Everyone's Safer: Supporting effective leadership responses to harmful sexual behaviour in schools

[Keeping everyone safer in schools: what we've learnt from working with more than 240 schools to prevent harmful sexual behaviour - Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#)