

Somerset Harmful Sexual Behaviour Protocol

Protocol to support children who are suspected or observed displaying sexualised behaviour that may be harmful to themselves or others



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USEFUL RESOURCES:

[Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset](#)

[Strategy Discussions - practice guidance](#)

[South West Child Protection Procedures](#)

INTRODUCTION

This Harmful Sexual Behaviour Protocol is a partnership document and applies to all Somerset agencies. This protocol was developed to respond to children who could be displaying sexualised behaviour that may be harmful to themselves or others.

For those children that may be impacted by a child's harmful sexual behaviours, usual safeguarding children processes should be followed.

This protocol is designed to support those reading it to understand their role and responsibility alongside their own agency guidelines. Further support is available through the links at the end of this protocol. All staff should consult with their named safeguarding lead for advice when responding to concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour.



WHAT IS HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive [Hackett, S. (2014) Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. London: Research in Practice].

Children and young people typically display a range of sexualised behaviours as they grow up, some behaviours may be deemed developmentally appropriate. If you are unsure whether identified behaviours may be developmentally appropriate or not, please seek advice from your organisation's safeguarding lead. However, some may display problematic or abusive sexualised behaviour. This is harmful to the children who display it as well as the people it's directed towards. [[NSPCC](#)]

Hackett's continuum presents sexualised behaviour as a range from 'normal' to 'inappropriate', 'problematic', 'abusive' and 'violent' (Hackett, 2010) (see Appendix A).

There are no officially agreed ways of describing sexualised behaviours which cause concern. Advice and support for professionals can be sought using a variety of resources including stopitnow.org.uk website or the [NSPCC helpline](#). Hackett's continuum of Need can support professionals to identify levels of behaviours (see Appendix A).

Professionals should use a locally agreed tool as part of the assessment of behaviours. These assessments should take into account the child's age, developmental status and gender alongside any known neurodevelopmental or learning disabilities. If you are unsure about these behaviours as part of your assessment you can seek advice and support from your safeguarding leads.

[Training on the Brook Traffic Light Tool is available in Somerset from the Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership.](#) The training and accompanying tool equip professionals to make consistent and informed decisions that neither stigmatise nor criminalise young people.

Many children who display sexualised behaviours that cause concern have themselves been victims of abuse, neglect or other trauma, and this should be considered at all stages of assessment and intervention.

HOW THIS PROTOCOL SUPPORTS THE PERSON READING IT

This protocol will support those working with concerns around Harmful Sexual Behaviour to determine the level of concern and required actions. In determining the behaviours presented by children it is important to consider them alongside the developmental age and needs of the individual child. Each situation should be considered individually, as well as considering any other behaviours of concern to identify any patterns.

A graduated response is required to support children who are suspected of or who are displaying sexualised behaviour. Consideration needs to be given to potential root cause of behaviours and safeguarding this child. All partners retain their responsibilities to record and report behaviours which are indicative of significant harm.

RESPONDING TO AND MANAGING SITUATIONS

All those working with children and young people have a role to play in identifying and responding to sexually concerning or harmful behaviours. Professionals should respond to each situation as it arises remembering that each situation is individual and action should be taken in response to the behaviours and needs of the children at that time

If a child is displaying sexualised behaviour it's important to take immediate action to:

- Prevent the behaviour from escalating
- [Keep everyone involved safe](#)

If any child or young person reveals they are at risk of suffering actual or likely significant harm, the practitioner should follow the local safeguarding process immediately.

Consider if any medical assessment or intervention is required. Please seek advice from a Medical Practitioner with the necessary expertise. The following links provide further information:

- [Responding to Abuse and Neglect](#)
- [Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment](#)
- [South West Child Protection Procedures - Child Sexual Abuse](#)

A discussion with your agency named safeguarding lead is required. Specific records should be kept in line with your own agency record keeping policies.

All sexualised behaviours require some form of attention and response, but the type of intervention will vary according to the behaviour (Hackett, 2010) (see Appendix A).

NORMAL BEHAVIOURS

Behaviours considered normal age-appropriate sexual behaviours should be reviewed alongside any any information held about the child/ren and family should involve parents/carers as appropriate having regard to the behaviour's content and context. Education should be offered to children to support healthy development around relationships.

PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIOURS

Where behaviours are considered inappropriate or problematic the child or young person will need support to help them change their behaviour and stop the behaviour escalating.

Problematic sexual behaviours might also indicate that a child has experienced trauma or abuse, so it's important to respond appropriately to keep the child safe.

Consideration for a review of early help and what interventions are required to help and support the young person displaying inappropriate or problematic behaviour.

HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS

If harmful sexual behaviour is displayed referrals should be made to child protection services and the criminal justice system, if necessary.

If you are aware or suspect that a criminal act has taken place irrespective of the gravity of the behaviour this must be reported to the police. Reporting to the police may not result in a criminal outcome, however all criminal sexual behaviours need to be recorded on the police system. Where a child is relevant to a criminal justice route because of their harmful sexual behaviours a Child First approach will be taken. Child First is the guiding principle for the youth justice sector and requires the youth justice system to treat children as children, see the whole child, including any structural barriers they face and focus on better outcomes for children. [This will also create safer communities with fewer victims.](#)



STRATEGY DISCUSSION

If there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm a Strategy Discussion can be requested and will be convened by Children's Social Care. Relevant professionals, which should include Police, Health, any Education provision, the Youth Justice Team Operational or local Team Leader (if the child is ten or over) will be invited. The vulnerability and safeguarding needs of the child / young person alleged to be causing the harm must be considered as part of a strategy discussion alongside the needs of any identified victim/s.

[Strategy Discussions - practice guidance](#)

Whilst no injuries may be present or visible, the following link contains information about the Child Protection medical policy which would need to be consulted for any young people who have experienced sexual abuse, including harmful sexual behaviour

[Injuries to Non-Mobile Babies and Children and Child Protection Medical Policy](#)

ASSESSMENT

Where a child and family would benefit from co-ordinated support from more than one organisation or agency (e.g. education, health, housing, police) there should be an inter-agency assessment. The Early Help Assessment should be evidence-based, be clear about the action to be taken and services to be provided and identify what help the child and family require to prevent needs escalating to a point where intervention would be needed through a statutory assessment under the Children Act 1989 .

The Effective Support for Children and Families in Somerset should be used to identify thresholds for intervention alongside completion of an Early Help Assessment .

Assessments should consider:

- The nature and extent of the harmful sexual behaviour with reference to where it features on a locally agreed tool and Hackett Continuum and specify any age/developmental differences between alleged perpetrator and victim, emotional distress caused to victim(s) and any coercion or violence used. The child / young person alleged to be causing the harm's response to the allegations should be considered alongside examination of the needs met by the behaviour.
- The context of the abusive behaviours – where, when, how it was discovered and reaction of carers with reference to the Sexual Behaviour.
- The child / young person's learning needs and any neurodevelopmental needs, such as autism spectrum conditions and the relevance of this for the harmful sexual behaviour.
- Past trauma or abuse child may be suffering. Any Mental illness of child.
- Any family or wider social factors that may have contributed to the harmful sexual behaviour
- Parent/carer capacity to adequately supervise the child/young person to prevent further harm.
- The impact of the harmful sexual behaviour on other family members.

- Ongoing education and accommodation arrangements in relation to the risk of further harm should be considered by all relevant partners.
- The response of the local community to the child and an assessment of the risks to the child as a result.

MULTI-AGENCY PLAN AND PROVISION OF SERVICES

Following any assessment, a well-coordinated multi-agency plan is key to facilitate safe and effective work and promote effective information sharing. This should be integrated, in most cases, with any existing service's case management process such as Team Around the Family, Child in Need, Looked After Child, through the Child Protection Plan (including both Conferences and Core Groups), or prevention service involvement or Youth Justice Team Multi-Agency Risk and well-being Panel approach.

To avoid delay, an early review or additional meeting should be called, if necessary, to ensure timely action is taken to intervene and ensure safety.

The lead professional or allocated worker should coordinate a multi-agency planning meeting on completion of the assessment with all relevant agencies, including education and parents / carers wherever possible.

The plan should:

- Address all assessed needs, not just the sexual behaviour concerns, and take account of the child/young person's learning and developmental ability including neurodevelopment.
- Support the child/young person to build a positive social identity free from harmful sexual behaviour.
- Be reviewed in a timely way and take account of any changes in risk.
- Make effective use of the safety plan framework to address any specific risk of further harmful sexual behaviour, including via technology where appropriate.
- Provide clear information to the family regarding any planned interventions, and ensure parents/carers are included in the work (unless this is judged not to be in the child's interests).
- Safeguard the child in addition to considering how to safeguard others from the sexualised behaviours of concern.
- Support the child to access appropriate mental health support if indicated.



DIRECT INTERVENTION

Where direct intervention work is indicated to address sexual behaviour concerns identified in the assessment report, practitioners trained in specific/appropriate interventions should be drawn primarily from the virtual team around the child.

Where higher level Problematic, Abusive and/or Violent sexual behaviours are established to have taken place (Hackett continuum), a recognised Harmful Sexual Behaviour assessment tool such as the [AIM framework](#) should be used to inform the assessment and plan.

All requests for intervention for any need of a child or their family from local authority Children's Services are completed through an Early Help Assessment, through Somerset Council's Family Front Door.

For cases where sexualised behaviours are identified and cause any concern, we recommend that a Brook Traffic Light Tool is also completed, by a practitioner trained in using this tool, and sent with the Early Help Assessment.

Guidance on completing an Early Help Assessment and making a request can be found using the link below:

[Early Help Assessment and Supporting Documents](#)

The Family Front Door will review and signpost to the most appropriate service / support or intervention, which may include recognised Harmful Sexual Behaviour assessments, interventions or response.



USEFUL LINKS

To explore further, and when advising parents and professionals, the following links can be helpful to use or pass on. Either click on the link below or enter the title and into a search engine.

GUIDANCE FOR PROFESSIONALS

[NICE Guidance on harmful sexual behaviour](#)

[Working together to safeguard children](#)

[Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership: Policies and Procedures](#)

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT

[Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool \(Brook\)](#)

[Child's play? Preventing abuse among children and young people \(Stop it Now!\)](#)

[Healthy sexual behaviour \(NSPCC\)](#)

[Helping you understand the sexual development of children under the age of 5 \(Parents Protect\)](#)

[Helping you understand the sexual development of children 5-11 \(Parents Protect\)](#)

[Healthy and unhealthy relationships \(Childline\)](#)

[PANTS sexual harm prevention resources for conversations and work with children \(NSPCC\)](#)

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND

[Healthy bodies guides to puberty and sexual development for parents of CYP with learning disabilities \(Vanderbilt\)](#)

[Growing up, sex and relationships – a guide for young disabled people and a guide to support parents of young disabled people \(Contact\)](#)



ONLINE SAFETY AND PORNOGRAPHY

[What's the problem? A guide for parents of children and young people who have got in trouble online \(Parents Protect\)](#)

[Think U Know – Parents](#)

[Think U Know – Professionals](#)

[Keeping children in care safe online \(Think U Know\)](#)

[Keeping children safe - Online porn \(NSPCC\)](#)

[Keeping children safe - Online safety advice for parents \(NSPCC\)](#)

[Your guide to social networks your kids use \(NSPCC\)](#)



SEXTING

[Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people, Guidance on responding to incidents and safeguarding children and young people, \(DfD,C,M&S, 2020\)](#)

[Sexting: how to respond to an incident](#)

[Searching, screening and confiscation: Advice for headteachers, school staff and governing bodies](#)

[Keeping children safe - Sexting \(NSPCC\)](#)

[Nude selfies – a parents' guide \(Think U Know\)](#)



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

[The AIM Project](#)



OTHER CONCERNS

If you are concerned that a young person may be experiencing Child Exploitation, please see the SSCP Exploitation webpage / resources below:

[Child Exploitation webpage](#)

Responding to children who display sexualised behaviour

It's important to be able to distinguish developmentally typical sexual behaviours from those that may be problematic or harmful, and make sure children get appropriate support. Always consider the child's holistic needs and safeguarding concerns alongside any sexualised behaviour and follow due procedures accordingly. This guide is a tool to support objective decision making about a child or young person's sexual behaviour and does not replace professional judgement or policy and legislation. Visit nspcc.org.uk/hsb for more information.

Childline

For children who need further support our free, confidential helpline is available 24/7:
 ➔ Call **0800 1111**
 ➔ Visit childline.org.uk

Need advice?

Contact our helpline for advice and support:
 ➔ Call **0808 800 5000**
 ➔ Email help@nspcc.org.uk
 ➔ Visit nspcc.org.uk/helpline

Developmentally typical

Normal

- Developmentally expected and socially acceptable behaviour
- Consensual, mutual and reciprocal
- Decision making is shared

How to respond

- Although green behaviours are not concerning, they still require a response
- Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally
- Talk to parents about developmentally typical sexualised behaviours
- Explain how parents can positively reinforce messages about appropriate sexual behaviour and act to keep their children safe from abuse
- Signpost helpful resources like our 'Talk PANTS' activity pack: nspcc.org.uk/pants
- Make sure young people know how to behave responsibly and safely

Problematic

Inappropriate

- Single instances of developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Behaviour that may be socially acceptable within a peer group but not in wider society
- May involve an inappropriate context for behaviour that would otherwise be considered normal

How to respond

- Amber behaviours should not be ignored
- Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally
- Consider the child's developmental age as well as their chronological age, alongside wider holistic needs and safeguarding concerns about the problematic sexualised behaviour
- Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection
- Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a nominated child protection lead who can be notified and will provide support
- Consider whether the child or young person needs therapeutic support and make referrals as appropriate

Harmful

Abusive

- Intrusive behaviour
- May involve a misuse of power
- May have an element of victimisation
- May use coercion and force
- May include elements of expressive violence
- Informed consent has not been given (or the victim was not able to consent freely)

How to respond

- Red behaviours indicate a need for immediate intervention and action
- If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999
- Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection
- Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a nominated child protection lead who should be notified and will provide support
- Typically referrals to children's social care and the police should be required. Referrals to therapeutic services should only be made once statutory services have been informed and followed due procedures

Violent

- Physically violent sexual abuse
- Highly intrusive
- May involve instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator
- May involve sadism

In partnership with:



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