

Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour.



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Introduction

This document provides a summary of the key messages from research conducted by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. The research explores various aspects of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), including its definition, prevalence, characteristics, and effective interventions. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of HSB and offer insights into prevention and intervention strategies. For more detailed information, please refer to the full document available at [Key-Messages-harmful-sexual-behaviour-ENG 2018.pdf](#)

Key Messages

- **Definition:** Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) encompasses a range of behaviours by under-18s, from inappropriate to violent.
- **Prevalence:** No accurate figures exist, but under-18s are responsible for a significant proportion of child sexual abuse.
- **Characteristics:** Pre-adolescent children displaying HSB often have histories of sexual abuse or trauma. Older children displaying HSB are mostly boys with adverse childhood experiences.
- **Technology:** Limited research suggests a link between viewing online pornography and subsequent HSB.
- **Interventions:** Effective interventions are holistic, child-focused, and involve parents/carers.
- **Prevention:** Education should take a long-term, whole-school approach to healthy relationships.

What is Harmful Sexual Behaviour?

HSB is defined as sexual behaviour by under-18s that is developmentally inappropriate and may be harmful or abusive. It exists on a continuum from normal to violent behaviours.

Extent of Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Accurate figures are unavailable, but HSB covers a broad spectrum of behaviours. Most HSB involves children who are well known to each other, often siblings or close relatives.

Characteristics of Children and Young People Displaying Harmful Sexual Behaviour

- **Pre-adolescent Children:** Their behaviour is seldom intentionally abusive and often linked to their own experiences of sexual abuse or trauma.
- **Adolescents:** The early teens are the peak time for HSB, with most offenders being male and having histories of abuse or neglect. Outcomes for these adolescents are often poor.
- **Children with Learning Disabilities or Autism:** These children are more vulnerable to both being sexually abused and displaying HSB. In one large UK study, 38% of under-18s referred to specialist services for HSB were assessed as having a learning disability. Reasons for this include less understanding of acceptable sexual behaviours, fewer opportunities to establish acceptable sexual relationships, less sex education, and difficulties with social skills.
- **Girls and Young Women:** Girls displaying HSB often have experienced more victimisation and maltreatment than boys. Studies have found that girls who sexually harm typically have experienced more chronic and extensive maltreatment in childhood, have been sexually abused at an earlier age, and are more likely to have been abused by more than one person. Girls' abusive sexual behaviour tends to be identified at a younger age and involves younger victims.

· Adolescents

The early teens are the peak time for the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). The vast majority of adolescents displaying such behaviour are male. Research has shown that boys who have committed a sexual offence or have been referred to specialist services due to concerns about their behaviour generally have other major difficulties in their lives. These difficulties often include experiences of physical or sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, or having parents with mental health or substance abuse issues.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are more strongly linked to antisocial behaviour in males than in females. Adolescents displaying abusive or violent sexual behaviour are likely to have low self-esteem, poor social skills, and difficulties with anger, depression, and peer relationships. Given these factors, it is unsurprising that adult outcomes for these adolescents are often poor. While numerous studies suggest that rates of further sexual offending are low, a recent 10- to 20-year follow-up study found that only a quarter of young people previously referred to a specialist service had entirely successful life outcomes. Common experiences among these individuals included unstable relationships and living situations, health issues, and drug and alcohol misuse.

When HSB involves siblings, it may occur within a context of family violence and neglect. Compared with other intra-familial abuse, sibling HSB may occur more often, over longer periods, and be more likely to involve intrusive acts.

It is increasingly recognised that some forms of sexual harassment and abusive behaviours between adolescents are so commonplace in some schools and colleges that some young people may regard them as 'normal'. More highly abusive and violent sexual behaviour may occur in the context of groups or gangs, where sexual violence can be coerced as well as normalised. Higher levels of general antisocial behaviour tend to be shown by adolescents who behave in sexually harmful ways towards their peers.

It is important to remember that most victims of sexual abuse do not go on to abuse others, and most children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour do not go on to sexually offend as adults. However, older adolescents who abuse younger children and those whose sexual behaviours involve violence are at greater risk of further sexual offending.

Technology-assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour - TA -HSB

Although research is limited, there is evidence that viewing online pornography can trigger offline HSB. One UK study found that the developmentally inappropriate use of pornography had been a trigger for offline behaviour in more than half of cases involving young males displaying both online-facilitated and offline HSB. Boys who regularly watched online pornography were found to be significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes. The relationship between viewing pornography and subsequent harmful behaviours is likely to depend on the type and content of material viewed, the motivation for viewing, and factors such as age at first viewing and the intensity of viewing.

Effective Assessment

Assessments should be holistic, considering the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as their family circumstances. A tiered approach to assessment is recommended.

Effective Interventions

Most evidence on interventions comes from studies of boys convicted of sexual offences. Interventions should be proportionate to the behaviour and involve parents/carers. Trauma-informed interventions are relevant.

Prevention

Prevention-focused activities are generally school-based programmes promoting healthy relationships. Effective approaches are longer-term and involve children and young people in development and delivery. A broader public health approach is advocated. There continues to be a 'sexual double standard' through which boys' sexual behaviours increase their status with male peers, while girls are condemned or 'slut-shamed' if images of them are shared.

Research suggests that many young people learn about sex primarily through pornography, leading young men to think that sex should be 'aggressive' and 'forceful'. Evaluations of school-based programmes have found only minimal impact on behaviour, although they can build confidence, increase knowledge, and change some attitudes that may legitimise harmful behaviours. The most effective approaches are longer-term and involve children and young people in development and delivery. They also take a whole-school approach, considering how schools promote healthy relationships across the curriculum, in their bullying and safeguarding policies, in their pastoral support, and in the information and support they give parents. Punitive and sanctions-based approaches to harmful sexual behaviour have been found to reduce disclosure by children, who do not see them as effective and limit staff decision-making.

Statistics and Findings

- There are no accurate prevalence figures on the full spectrum of harmful sexual behaviours. However, available data suggests that under-18s are responsible for a significant proportion of child sexual abuse.

The Extent of Harmful Sexual Behaviour

- Among referrals to local authority children's services in England during 2021/22 where sexual abuse was assessed to be a concern, 40% involved harmful sexual behaviour.
- It has been estimated that between a quarter and a half of harmful sexual behaviour involves siblings or close relatives such as cousins, nephews, and nieces.
- A survey on sexism in secondary schools found that 37% of girls reported experiencing sexual harassment, compared to 6% of boys.
- Nearly 90% of girls – as well as 50% of boys – said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'.

Children with Learning Disabilities or Autism

- In one large UK study, 38% of under-18s referred to specialist services because of harmful sexual behaviour were assessed as having a learning disability.
- A UK survey found that 48% of 11–16-year-olds had viewed pornography – and among those who had done so, 34% reported seeing it once a week or more.

Adolescents

- The early teens are the peak time for the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour.
- The vast majority of adolescents who display such behaviour are male.
- A recent 10- to 20-year follow-up of young people previously referred to a specialist service found that only a quarter had entirely successful life outcomes.

Technology-assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour

- One UK study found that, among young males displaying both online-facilitated and 'offline' harmful sexual behaviour, the developmentally inappropriate use of pornography

had been a trigger for their offline behaviour in more than half of cases.

- Boys who regularly watched online pornography were found to be significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes.

Prevention

- A survey found that 61% of girls aged 11–16 said school staff sometimes or always dismissed sexual harassment as just banter or ‘boys messing around’.
- A quarter (27%) of secondary teachers would not feel confident tackling a sexist incident if they experienced or witnessed it in school.

References

This is a summary of the Key Messages from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse document. You can read the full document and access a complete list of references at **CSA Centre. (2018). Key Messages harmful sexual behaviour.**

Retrieved from [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour](#)

