

**Believe in  
children**



**Barnardo's  
Cymru**

# Harmful sexual behaviour

A parent's guide



Ariennir gan  
**Lywodraeth Cymru**  
Funded by  
**Welsh Government**

## **What is Harmful Sexual Behaviour?**

Harmful sexual behaviours' (HSB) can be defined as: sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. This definition of HSB includes both contact and non-contact behaviours. *All Wales Practice Guide and Procedures 2019* [Safeguarding children where there are concerns about harmful sexual behaviour](#)

## **Are we the only family this has happened to?**

HSB displayed by children is neither a new concept nor uncommon when we consider forms of sexual abuse. In a UK study, two thirds of the contact sexual abuse experienced by children was displayed by other children (Radford et al. 2011) this figure has remained largely unchanged in other studies completed since. As our understanding of harm online increases, it appears that harmful sexual behaviour by children via digital means is also considerable with more and more reports of children being both harmed online and displaying harmful behaviour to others themselves in this context.

## **Discovering your child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour**

Finding out your child or a child in your care has displayed harmful

behaviour can feel frightening and overwhelming. It is important not to keep concerns to yourself and to seek care and support from your local social services department. While this can feel stressful and difficult to do, it is the only way in the longer term to make sure you get the right support for your child, others involved and your family.

As a parent or carer you may play a key role in supporting your child to talk to professionals in an open and honest way so the right support can be put in place. It is important not to minimise the concerns, for example by dismissing the account of others involved or the harm suffered by them. Equally, it is important not to use adult labels when talking about the behaviour and to remember that your child is your child first and foremost and that you will play an important role in helping them and others understand the harmful sexual behaviour displayed. Helping your child to feel supported may be difficult at times and you may experience a range of emotions and thoughts about your child or the behaviour that may be difficult for you. It will be important that you also have a safe space to explore your feelings and ask any questions you may have to help you to do that.

Getting the right help at the right time for your child and family will significantly reduce further harm to them or others. Whilst it may be difficult, asking for professional help the first time you have concerns about a child's sexual behaviour will

help professional take a proportionate response.

### **Child Sexual Developmental**

Understanding what is normal and expected in relation to child sexual development across a child's life course is an important part of understanding when a child's behaviour steps outside this into behaviours that are inappropriate, problematic or abusive. It is not unusual for teenagers to explore aspects of sexual behaviour with one another. Where there is a lack of choice, mutuality or consent however the behaviour may be harmful to both children. Factors which impact upon a person's ability to provide informed consent may include feeling threatened or forced to comply with the behaviour or a difference in power or status due to age, size, gender, ability or other reasons.

Similarly it is not unusual for younger children to be curious or interested in their own genitals or the body parts of others from a young age. However where this behaviour is more grown up than we would expect or is persistent and cannot be redirected by adult caregivers, it may signal the need for further investigation as to the function of the behaviour for the child.

Sexualised behaviour displayed by younger children must be viewed differently to that displayed by teenagers or adults. It is very unlikely to be sexually motivated and may be an attempt to signal distress or possible mimicking of behaviour

the child has experienced or witnessed. Talking to a professional about any concerns you may have will be important to ensure your child receives the correct support in these circumstances.

### **Proportionate responses to harmful sexual behaviour**

It can be difficult for parents and professionals to understand what is healthy and expected sexual behaviour for children. A number of tools that help us consider what behaviours may be healthy and expected for children or harmful and abusive to themselves and others have been developed to support our understanding and responses.

Those frequently used by professionals in Wales include The Brookes Traffic Light tool and Hacketts continuum of sexual behaviour. [Safeguarding children where there are concerns about harmful sexual behaviour](#)

These tools help to define behaviours that are expected and healthy in line with the child's age, as well as those that are harmful to the child themselves or others.

The tools also help to guide our understanding of proportionate responses to the behaviour, to ensure children in Wales, where there are concerns in relation to HSB are responded to with developmental awareness.

If you are concerned about any aspect of your child's sexual development or behaviour it is important to seek support at the earliest opportunity. Doing so will

reduce the concerns escalating and impacting upon other areas of your child's development.

### **Sibling Sexual Abuse**

As a parent, finding out that your child has sexually abused their sibling can be extremely painful. You may question how and why you may have missed it occurring and be unsure about how you should respond to both or all children involved. The answers to these questions are complex and you will likely need your own safe space and support to explore your feelings and emotional response in these circumstances. Both children will need you to be part of their recovery and relationship repair as well as making changes to the environment to make it safe for both or all involved children.

Sexual abuse between siblings is no less harmful to the child. In fact sibling abuse may have gone on for a longer period of time, been more frequent in nature and leave both children with high levels of guilt, confusion and shame.

It is important to recognise the behaviour as abusive and to see both or all of the children as having distinct and individual needs. The most important thing is to make it safe for each child and to work with professionals to stop all aspects of the abuse persisting.

### **Understanding the why question**

If you are asking the WHY question then you are likely to have accepted your child has behaved in a way that

was harmful to others. Searching for the reasons is a real struggle for parents. Wondering if it was something you did or didn't do, what it now means for your child going forward or whether or not they will repeat the behaviour are all questions that parents tell us they struggle with. While throughout the course of supporting your child and family, answers to these questions may be provided, it is important not to let them get in the way of making your home safe and supporting your child from getting the help they need.

There are many reasons why children display harmful sexual behaviour. It is not unusual for the child not to know why they acted that way themselves. It is more likely that there were a number of factors that influenced the behaviour happening rather than one single trigger or event. Professionals may only be able to say that there were certain factors present that came together and influenced your child's behaviour. Or that your child's behaviour was motivated by different factors on different occasions where they displayed harmful sexual behaviour. It is not unusual for children to find talking about their behaviour difficult and this can lead to them minimising or denying the concerns. This can occur even more so when parents are also denying or minimising the concerns. While denial is not a factor linked to the child repeating the behaviour of concern supporting your child to be as open as possible with professionals will ensure they receive

the right support and supervision where needed.

The reasons children display harmful sexual behaviour will be unique to the individual child but we know there are some factors which may influence HSB by children. These may include the child's own unresolved experience of abuse or trauma, leaving them with unhelpful messages about them self, any unmet needs or beliefs about sex and relationships.

Children who display HSB may also have limited accurate knowledge about sex and relationships. They may have received unhealthy messages from aspects of their own life or been exposed to unhealthy messaging from pornography. Feeling disconnected or isolated from their peers may also influence HSB by children. For teenagers particularly, who are disconnected, lonely or isolated, they may lack the confidence needed to form and maintain an age appropriate and mutual relationship. However, for some, where the opportunity presents, they may seek connection and intimacy in harmful ways with those who appear less threatening to them.

It is important that the complexity surrounding HSB by children is understood and all the factors that may have influenced the behaviour occurring are taken into account within the child's own recovery plans. It is more likely that a number of the factors mentioned and others that are not will have influenced your child's behaviour,

rather than a one of single event. Supporting your child to engage with professionals to understand the relevant factors for them, as well as your family as a whole, so that the right care and support can be provided will significantly reduce the likelihood of the behaviour being repeated.

### **Impact on self**

Looking after yourself while processing any information that is shared will be really important in making sure you stay well both physically and emotionally. As a parent you may have many questions that you need answered but may not feel that you can talk to others inside your family about. Parents tell us that they fear losing the support of their family as well as sharing concerns around stigma and isolation should the information become known in the wider community.

For some parents the discovery of HSB without adequate care and support can lead to them suffering episodes of poor mental health themselves. Professionals supporting your child can also help in ensuring any identified care and support needs parents have are included in recovery programmes. It is important that your own needs are identified and prioritised so that you can continue playing a key part in your child's monitoring, supervision and recovery.

### **Care, support and protection**

Accepting your child has behaved in a harmful way to others is the first

step to accessing the right care and support for them and your family. In Wales children who display harmful sexual behaviour are seen as children first and professionals will strive to seek the least stigmatising response to meet the care, support and protection needs for them and others involved.

The majority of children who come to the attention of support services because of HSB will not need a criminal justice response to meet the underlying needs influencing their behaviour. Indeed, for many, this can have lifelong impacts that reduce best life chances being achieved. While the role of the criminal justice system needs to be considered, access to services should not depend on a child being charged with an offence.

Welsh Government guidance is clear that identifying and responding to HSB at the earliest opportunity in a proportionate way is the approach that all front line practitioners should take. Responses to children in Wales where there are concerns around HSB should be child centred and holistic rather than issue based. The needs of the child who has displayed the HSB will be considered alongside any risk posed by their behaviour and proportionate support to meet any presenting needs should be put in place.

## **Moving forward**

Despite any difficulties you may experience as a family following the discovery of HSB, with the right support at the right time the majority of children will not repeat HSB. It is important that you and your child are supported to move forward in life and that the behaviour does not define them into their future.

Many children who display HSB go on to achieve great success within their own capabilities following support. Having the consistent support and understanding of close family members when professional support reduces or ends is key to any child achieving their best lifelong chances and children who display HSB are no different.

Parents may feel anxious about services ending and a sense of isolation can return at these points. Engaging with professionals about any anxieties or unanswered questions before professional support comes to an end will help in you understanding the next steps for you and your child. Being aware of the work completed with your child and feeling confident to reinforce healthy messages about sexual behaviour and relationships across the child's life course will really help in them moving on to healthy adult sexual relationships in their future.



@BarnardosCymru



BarnardosCymru

[www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)