

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Safety planning in education

A guide for professionals supporting
children following incidents of
harmful sexual behaviour



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About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre)

Our overall aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response, so that children can live free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse.

Who we are

We are a multi-disciplinary team, funded by the Home Office, hosted by Barnardo's and working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.

Our aims

Our aims are to:

- increase the priority given to child sexual abuse, by improving understanding of its scale and nature
- improve identification of and response to all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse
- enable more effective disruption and prevention of child sexual abuse, through better understanding of sexually abusive behaviour/perpetration.

What we do

We seek to bring about these changes by:

- producing and sharing information about the scale and nature of, and response to, child sexual abuse
- addressing gaps in knowledge through sharing research and evidence
- providing training and support for professionals and researchers working in the field
- engaging with and influencing policy.

For more information on our work, please visit our website:
www.csacentre.org.uk 

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Introduction

For the sake of simplicity, in this resource we generally use the term 'child' to mean anyone under the age of 18. It is important to remember that teenagers as well as younger children can experience child sexual abuse.

We use the term '**parent**' to encompass any parent/carer of a child – including a biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent and another relative who may be the child's main care-giver, such as a grandparent.

We use '**school**' to refer to a child's place of learning; this may be a primary or secondary school (including residential schools), post-16 provision, a pupil referral unit, etc.

We have chosen to avoid some terms that are sometimes understood differently or that feel uncomfortable for some people:

- Instead of 'peer-perpetrated abuse' or 'peer-on-peer abuse' by under-18s, we talk about **harmful sexual behaviour displayed by a child or children towards another child or children**.
- Instead of 'perpetrator' or 'abuser', we talk about **the child who has harmed**.
- Instead of 'disclosing harmful sexual behaviour', we refer to **telling a professional** or similar. Telling may involve verbal and/or non-verbal communication.

We use the term '**conversation**' when referring to professionals' communication, including non-verbal communication, with a child.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for all professionals in schools or other places of learning for children, including pupil referral units and special schools; it is *not* just for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs).¹

It can be used to guide your thinking in supporting children of any age, including those with special education needs, following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour. After such an incident, both the child(ren) who have been harmed and the child(ren) who have harmed will require support. We suggest there is value in using this guide to reflect on the policies and procedures your school currently has in place, considering whether any areas could be strengthened in advance of an incident occurring.

We have tried to be as specific as possible in identifying who within the school is responsible for different actions following an incident, but we recognise that circumstances and resources vary from school to school: some may have a team of safeguarding leads, while others have just one. It is important to recognise that, while the DSL takes overall responsibility for managing these situations, *anyone* working with children should be able to talk to a child about sexual abuse, including harmful sexual behaviour. For example, it may be that, with support from the DSL, a class teacher, lunchtime supervisor or other member of school staff is best placed to talk directly to the child.

What does this resource cover?

There is a range of common and healthy sexual behaviour that children may display at different stages of development. If their behaviour is considered to be outside this range, it may be called 'harmful' because it harms them or others.

¹ In Wales the equivalent term is Designated Safeguarding Person. For simplicity, in this document we adopt the terminology used in England.

While it is not possible to list the full range of incidents that might prompt you to use this resource, it is primarily designed to support practice when incidents of harmful sexual behaviour affect or harm another child or children, and where you as a school need to consider the safety and wellbeing of all the children involved. Such incidents may occur in person, be assisted by technology, or incorporate elements of both.

There may be instances where a child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour towards an adult or towards children at another school. While this guidance has not been written to respond specifically to these instances, much of the content will be applicable.

How can this resource help you?

Responding to incidents of harmful sexual behaviour can be a challenge. This resource aims to help your school make decisions about how best to ensure the safety of *all* the children involved. These decisions should be made with the involvement of the children involved and their parents, and should be set out in a **safety plan**.

This resource is in three parts:

- **Part A** offers a brief explanation of **key actions** for the school after an incident of sexual behaviour by children occurs. It includes a guide to establishing whether the behaviour requires a response, and a **safety plan template** for recording and reviewing arrangements to ensure the safety of all the children involved.
- **Part B** contains **practical advice** on safety planning. It includes suggested approaches to take in communicating with the children involved and their parents, and a detailed list of **arrangements which you may want to consider including in the safety plan**.
- **The appendices** briefly set out how your school can prepare itself for incidents of harmful sexual behaviour, and provide links to useful resources for schools and for parents.

Always remember that the child(ren) who have harmed and the child(ren) who have been harmed – in addition to any other children affected – are all children first and foremost, and their safety, health and wellbeing need to be supported. However, these children's needs are not the same and may conflict with each other.

Your school should already have an up-to-date protocol/policy in place to guide your decision-making following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour – and all staff should be aware of this and confident in implementing it. If your school does not have such a policy, or the policy needs updating, see [Appendix 1](#).

This resource is underpinned by the following statutory guidance:

- In England, the latest edition of **[Keeping Children Safe in Education](#)** , published by the Department for Education in September 2022. This edition incorporates *Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment between Children in Schools and Colleges*, which was previously published separately.
- In Wales, **[Keeping Learners Safe](#)** , published by the Welsh Government in March 2022; also the Welsh Government's 2020 **[Guidance for Education Settings on Peer Sexual Abuse, Exploitation and Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#)** .

Safety planning: a summary

Following an incident of harmful sexual behaviour, there are a number of actions that the school should take to decide whether a safety plan is needed, and to develop a plan that is robust and effective. Different schools may go about these actions in different ways or in different orders; the list below is not intended to be prescriptive.

Relevant section of Part A	Action	Relevant advice in Part B
A1	Consider the nature and severity of the sexual behaviour as soon as possible after the incident.	B1
A2	Immediately talk to the children involved, and their parents.	B2, B3, B9
A3	Be ready to manage any communications about the incident, inside and potentially outside the school community.	B2, B3
A4	Consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the ongoing risks for all the children involved • how contact between the children can be managed • possible actions and arrangements to suit each child. 	B4, B7 B5 B6
A5	Hold a safety planning meeting for each child who has been harmed and their parent(s), to draft and agree content for the safety plan. Do the same for each child who has harmed and their parents. Ideally this should be done within a couple of days of the incident.	B6, B9
A6	Draw up the safety plan, share the relevant sections with all the children involved and their parents, and check their understanding of what has been put in place. Start implementing the safety plan. If a safety plan is required, this suggests there are potential risks that need to be managed, so having a plan in place as early as possible will benefit everyone involved.	B7
A7	Review the safety plan regularly until safety measures can be removed.	B8



Part A. What do you
need to do?

Consider the nature and severity of the sexual behaviour

This is an essential first step following any incident of sexual behaviour by a child.

It is important to remember that some sexual behaviour is part of a child's normative, healthy, sexual development. Professor Simon Hackett has developed a continuum² to describe the sexual behaviour of children:

Normal	Consensual, mutual, reciprocal and developmentally expected, with shared decision-making
Inappropriate	Displayed in isolated incidents; generally consensual, reciprocal and acceptable within a peer group, but may be in an inappropriate context
Problematic	May be socially unexpected, developmentally unusual, and compulsive, but with no element of victimisation; may lack reciprocity or equal power
Abusive	Intrusive, with a victimising intent or outcome; often involves manipulation, coercion, or lack of consent
Violent	Very intrusive and may have an element of sadism


The continuum recognises that there are times when children's sexual behaviour is a cause for concern. Hackett calls this '**harmful sexual behaviour**', defining it as:

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.

Record your thoughts on the nature and severity of the sexual behaviour observed or reported, including any known (previous and current) incidents. (You may need to speak to the children involved before recording these thoughts – see section **A2**.)

What do we know about the sexual behaviour?

Section **B1** contains advice to help you gain a full understanding of the sexual behaviour.

² Hackett, S. (2010) Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. In Barter, C. and Berridge, D. (eds.) *Children Behaving Badly? Peer Violence between Children and Young People*. Chichester: Blackwell Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470976586.ch9> 

If pre-adolescent children display sexual behaviour that is not 'normal', it is more likely to be *inappropriate* or *problematic* than *abusive* or *violent*. Young children may be 'acting out' abuse they have experienced themselves, or responding to other trauma and neglect; in some situations, they may use sexualised behaviour as an extension of bullying. The behaviour of very young children is often referred to as 'sexually reactive'; you should always consider whether the child has themselves been sexually abused.

The early teens are the peak time for the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour, most of which is displayed by boys. There are some gender differences: girls who display harmful sexual behaviour tend to do so at a younger age than boys. It is, however, important to recognise that harmful sexual behaviour can occur within same sex relationships for both boys and girls, and may be displayed by those who identify as transgender or non-binary.

Reflection point

Many children who display harmful sexual behaviour have experiences of abuse (including physical or sexual abuse, or living in a household where there is domestic abuse) or other difficulties in their lives. It is important to consider what experiences the child may have had, and how these may have contributed to their behaviour.

If you have concerns that the child may be experiencing harm, you should make a referral to children's social care.

Understanding the severity of the behaviour will help you to take appropriate actions that will ensure safety within your school. While this document cannot provide an example response to every possible behaviour, it is important to remember that all sexual behaviour which is not considered 'normal' requires a response, and the **Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)** must always be made aware if a child displays such behaviour:

Inappropriate or problematic behaviour



Here the response may be as simple as letting the child know that what they have done is not OK and why it is not OK.

If a more substantial response is required, the DSL will need to lead on developing and implementing a safety plan for all the children involved.

Children's social care and/or the police may investigate problematic behaviour referred to them by the DSL, depending on the context of the incident(s); they are unlikely to investigate inappropriate behaviour.

Abusive or violent behaviour

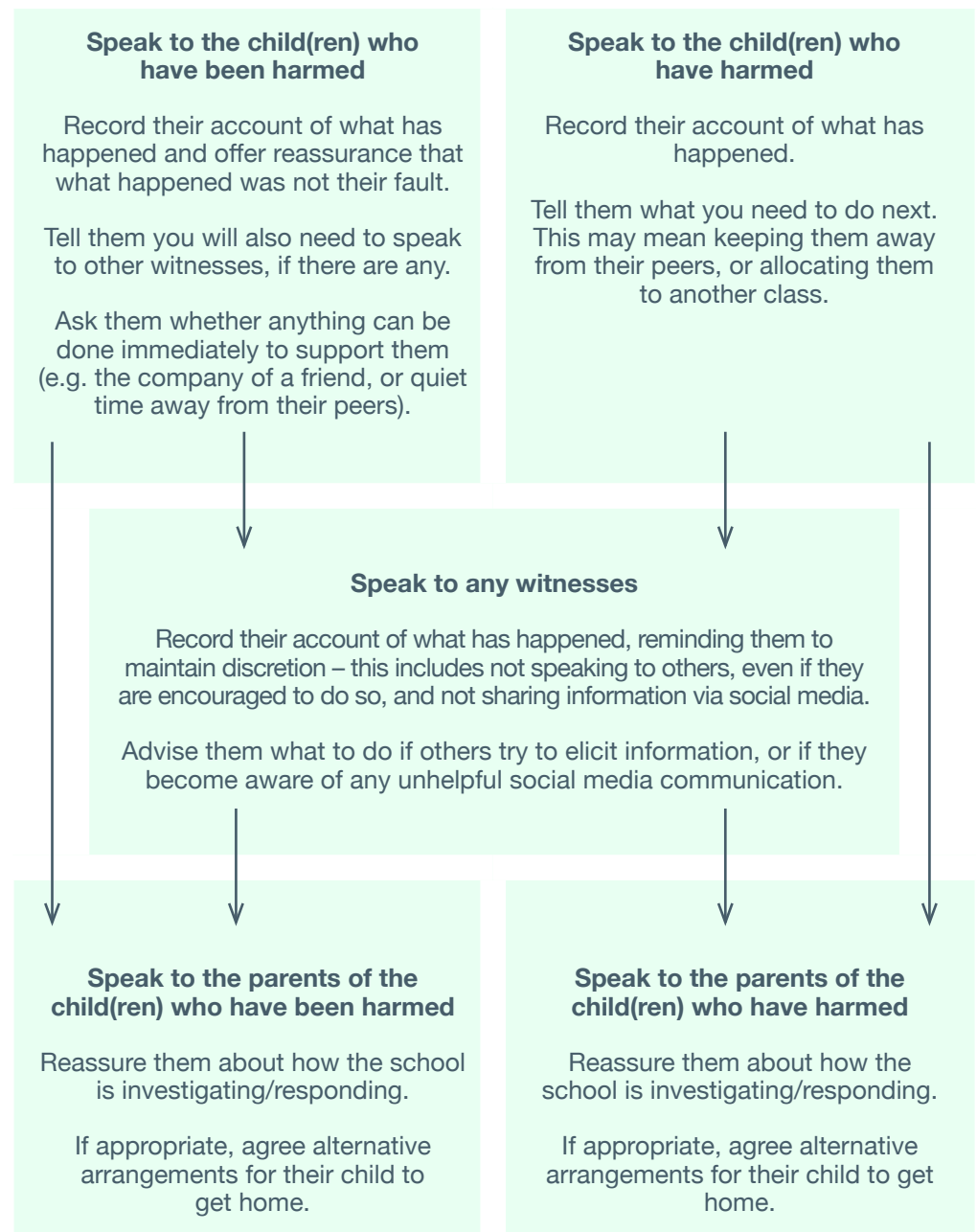


The DSL will make a referral to children's social care; an investigation by the police may follow.

Additionally, the DSL will lead on developing and implementing a safety plan for all the children involved.

Immediately talk to the children involved, and their parents

Speak to all the children involved in the incident, along with the parents of the children who harmed and were harmed. Key elements of these conversations are set out below, but note that the conversations don't need to take place in exactly this order; it may be appropriate to speak to any witnesses of the incident first, for example.



Sections **B2** and **B3** respectively contain advice on conducting your initial conversations with the children and their parents. Section **B9** has further advice if any of the children have special educational needs or disabilities.

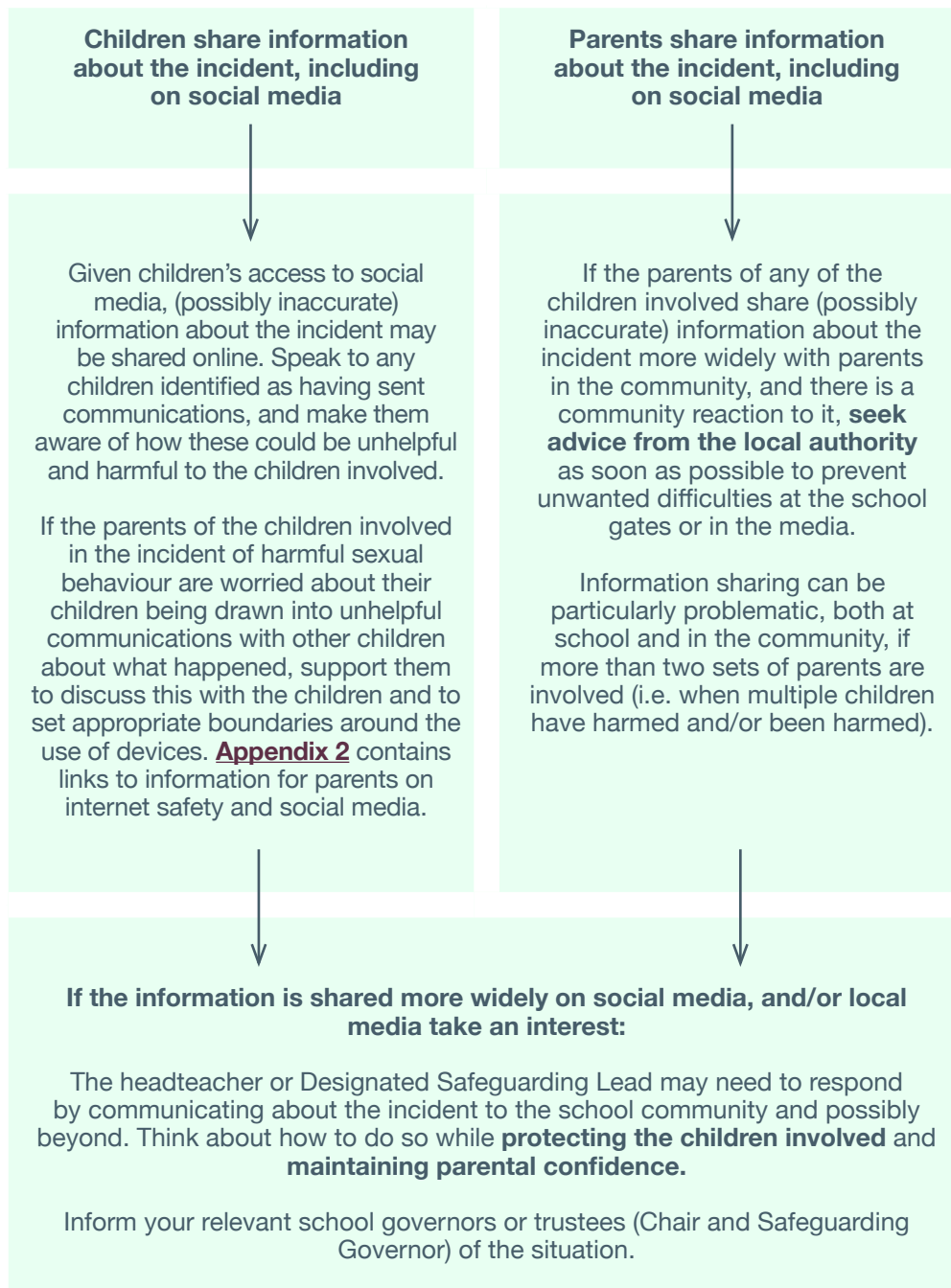
It may also be valuable for a trusted adult to meet with each child separately, before the safety planning meetings, to obtain their views and perspectives on the school, their lessons, their moods/states and other influences on them that should be reflected in a safety plan.

Manage communications about the incident

When an incident of harmful sexual behaviour comes to light, it should not normally be communicated beyond the children involved and their parents. But there may be occasions when it becomes more widely known, within and potentially outside the school community.

(Sections **B2** and **B3** contain advice on **minimising the likelihood** that the children involved or their parents will share information about the incident.)

Try to **anticipate any media coverage**, including on social media, and respond to any emerging situations as soon as possible to minimise potential harm to children and the school.

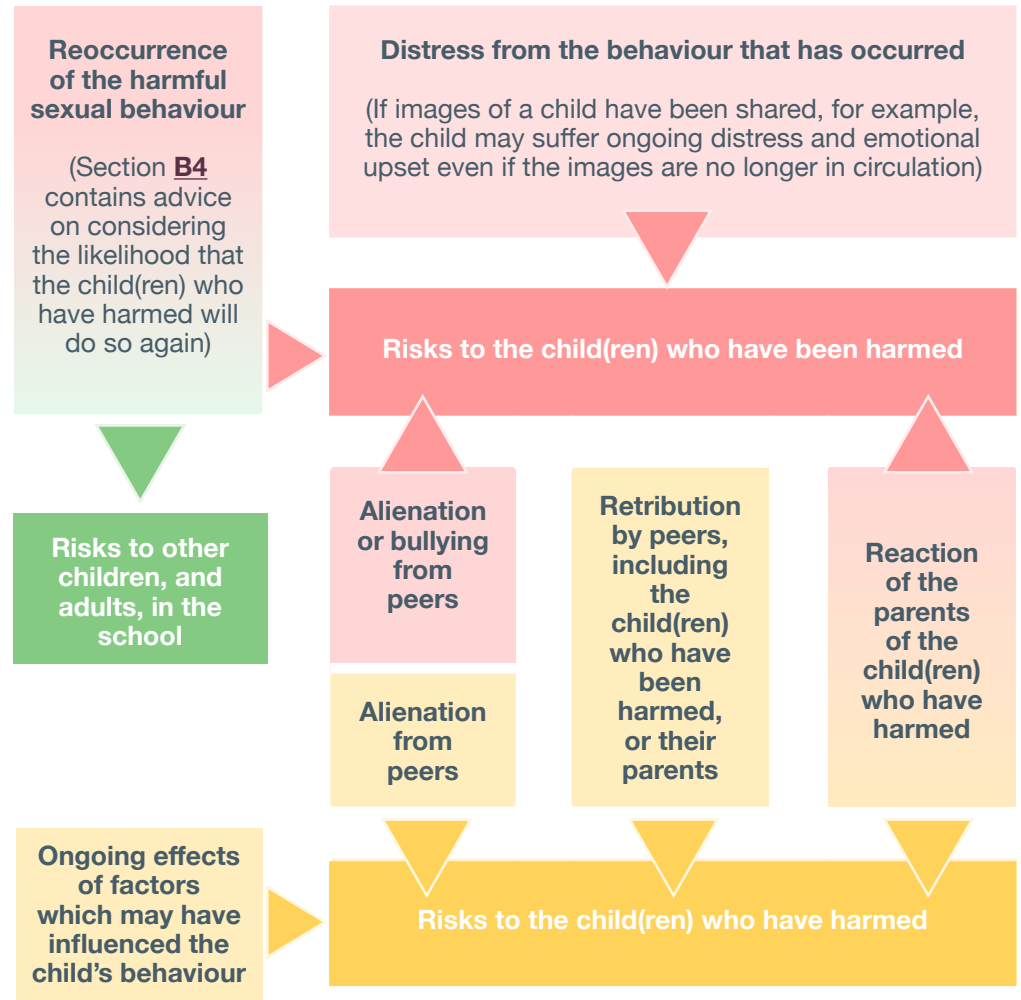


Consider risks and potential responses

Before holding safety planning meetings for each of the children involved and their parents, think about the issues that will need to be addressed.

What might be the ongoing risks?

Consider the risks in and around the school environment to both/all the children involved, and to others. These may include the following risks:

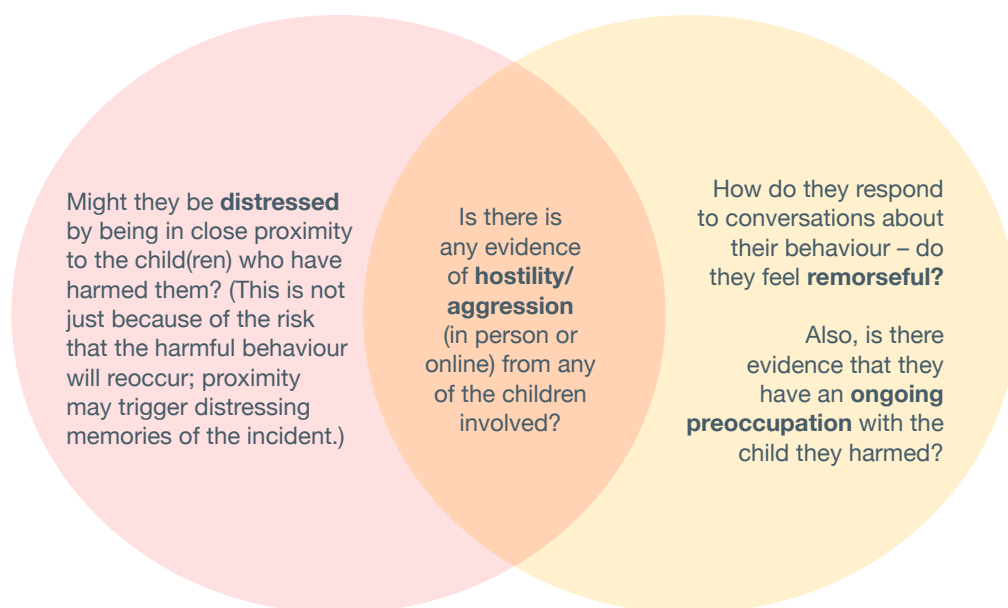


Does the school need to manage contact between the children?

The safety plan will need to ensure that the child(ren) who have been harmed feel as safe as possible, while the child(ren) who have harmed are not isolated from positive activities: To achieve this, it may be best to **keep the children separated** from one another:

Seek the views of the child(ren) who have been harmed:

Think too about the child(ren) who have harmed:



If the children need to be separated, the child(ren) who have been harmed should be enabled to lead as normal routine as possible without fear of coming into contact – including before and after school, and during breaks – with those who have harmed them.

Section **B5** outlines considerations for managing contact in specific settings.

What arrangements may be suitable?

Think ahead about possible **arrangements that may suit each child** – and take account of **cultural factors** or additional **learning needs** that may be relevant to any of the children.

Section **B6** lists a wide range of possible arrangements which may be appropriate.

Remember that any arrangements will need to be **agreed** with each child and their parent(s) during the safety planning meetings.

Hold a safety planning meeting for each child

There will need to be a separate meeting for each of the children involved, and their parent(s). Usually it will be appropriate to hold the meeting(s) for the child(ren) who have been harmed before those for the child(ren) who have harmed.

Attendance at the meeting

Each meeting will be led by the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, with the child and their parent(s) attending.

It may also be useful for the child's class teacher and other professionals involved in their life (such as a social worker) to attend.



Agree actions for the safety plan

Use the knowledge gained so far – about the nature of the behaviour, about the children, and about risks and how to mitigate them – to decide what actions need to be taken to ensure the safety of the child and other children in school. Section **B6** contains examples of possible arrangements might be made.

While the child and their parents should be encouraged to share their views, be clear that they cannot make decisions about the appropriate course of action for the other child(ren). You may need to point out that any actions taken will be proportionate, and that the school's aim is to keep both/all the children in school if possible.

In some instances it may be appropriate to place restrictions on the child(ren) who have harmed, limiting their access to the school environment for a period. If this is agreed, be clear about the timeframes, ensure there is a plan for the child(ren) to access their educational entitlement, and consider how they will be integrated back into school and their regular routines as soon as possible.



Record and confirm the agreed actions

During the meeting, the Designated Safeguarding Lead will record the agreed actions for the child, and go through them with the child and their parent(s). Our safety plan template on the next page can be used to record these actions; an e-version of the template is available on our website.

The record should be kept simple and should not include any sensitive information; remember that the safety plan will probably be shared with a wider group of staff.



Agree next steps

Agree with the parent(s) how they will receive the safety plan (by email or post, for example), and when.

Explain what the schedule for reviewing the safety plan will be, and tell the child and their parent(s) how they can share concerns if issues arise between reviews.

Safety plan template

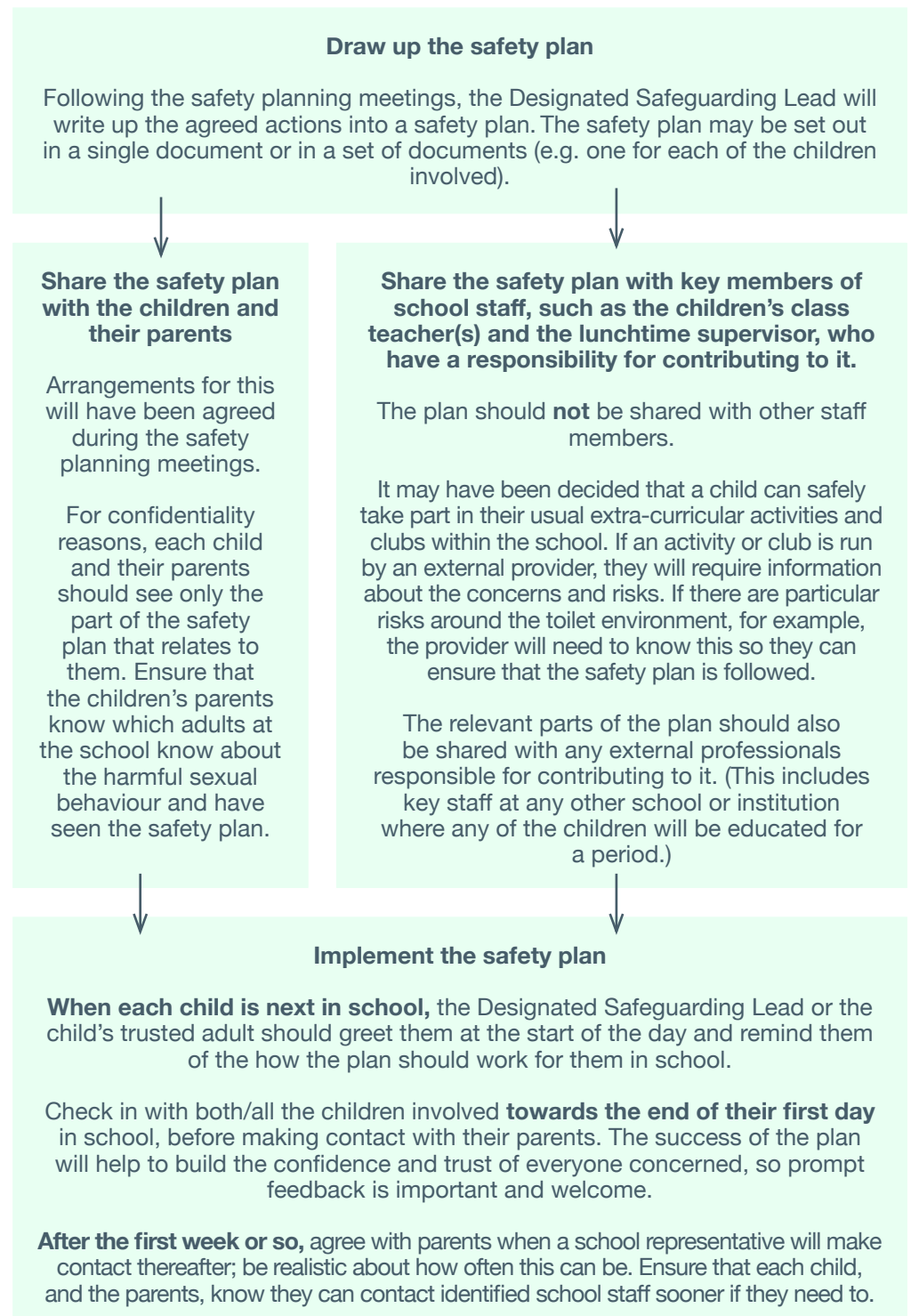
Safety plan for: (names of children)			
Completed by:		Date:	
Attendees: (those who have contributed to the plan)			

Identified concern or risk	Action(s) required	Responsibility	Date for review	Additional information (e.g. rationale for action)
Contact between the children				
Other arrangements in school				
Other arrangements outside school				

Draw up, share and implement the safety plan

Following an incident of harmful sexual behaviour, the first days and weeks in school can generate the greatest stress for the child(ren) who have been harmed, the child(ren) who have harmed, and their families. It can also be stressful for other children and staff.

Having a clear safety plan in place can help to reduce this.



Review the safety plan

Children are constantly developing, and their circumstances can develop too, so it is vital to review the safety plan regularly to ensure that it is proportionate to the level of risk identified.

Initially check the plan **every day**, then **weekly**, and subsequently review it on a **monthly** or **termly** basis; this is the Designated Safeguarding Lead's responsibility, although they may delegate the task to relevant staff such as each child's class teacher

Make sure that *everyone* contributing to the safety plan (including the children and their parents) knows the weekly, monthly or termly **review dates**.



Provide opportunities for **each child** to let their trusted adult know what is or is not working for them.

Some people contributing to the safety plan may not be part of the formal review process. Ensure they **feed back in good time** for each review, providing their perspective and highlighting any challenges.

Depending on the nature of any issues raised, changes to the safety plan can be made **immediately** or considered at the next formal review.



If progress has been made and the school is able to reduce safety measures:

Ensure that these changes are made **incrementally**, and continue to **monitor** the situation closely.

Tell the child(ren) who have been harmed about the changes in advance, and check that they will feel safe.

Communicate the changes to everyone else who will be affected by them, including relevant school staff and external partners.



If progress is not made or behaviour escalates:

You will need to review the plan to consider imposing more arrangements, and/or refer the behaviour to children's social care or the police, if this has not been done so already.

Section **B8** contains further advice on reducing safety measures and phasing out the safety plan, and on sharing information if one of the children moves permanently to another school.



Part B. How can
you best help all the
children involved?

Understanding the sexual behaviour that has occurred

Understanding of **exactly what has happened** will help you as a staff team to:

- build a picture of your concerns
- think about the circumstances in which a child may pose a risk of engaging in harmful sexual behaviour again (including through the use of technology)
- understand what can be done to create a safe environment for the children involved, including those who may be at risk of ongoing distress and emotional harm, as well as others in the school community.

By understanding the **dynamics of the relationship** between the child (or each child) who has harmed and the child(ren) who have been harmed, you as a staff team will be better able to identify possible **future risks** to other children. Questions to consider about the/each child who has harmed include:

- Have they harmed the same child once or more than once?
- Have they harmed more than one child (including children not in your school)?
- If they have harmed more than one child, can you identify any similar characteristics between those who have been harmed? Have they all been well known, or not known, to the child who has harmed?
- Where and when has the harm taken place – are there specific times and locations?
- What has been the nature of the harm?
- Can you identify any circumstances or factors that may lead to increased risk?

If the harm has occurred **online**, or is **assisted by technology**, **Appendix 2** contains links to information and resources that you may find useful.

If any **previous concerns** have been raised about the child who has harmed, think about how these might help you to understand what is happening for them and what risks they may pose. Is there a **pattern of concerning behaviour**?

For example, if the child displayed inappropriate, problematic, abusive or violent sexual behaviour in the past, what action was taken? Did they receive **clear messages** that their behaviour was not OK? If so, consider whether they understood these messages, and explore *why* they might not have understood. If you are confident that the child *did* understand the messages, why might they be continuing to display harmful sexual behaviour? Were the police, youth justice services or probation services involved – and, if so, do you know what the priorities were for their involvement and whether any assessments were made?

Reflection point

It may be helpful to pause briefly and think about **influences** on your understanding of the child's sexual behaviour. Might your understanding be different if the child were a different sex or age, for example, or if their ethnicity were the same as or different from yours?

Speaking to the children involved

After any incident of harmful sexual behaviour, a member of school staff will need to speak to the children involved: the child(ren) who have harmed, the child(ren) who have been harmed, and any witnesses. The best staff member to have this conversation is likely to be someone who has a good relationship with the child, and this should always be supported by the Designated Safeguarding Lead. That staff member should find out as much as they can about what has happened and how the children feel about it.

If the behaviour has been witnessed by a member of staff, the child will need an in-the-moment response. One suggestion for this is the four-stage approach developed by Toni Cavanagh-Johnson:³

1. **Stop the behaviour.** Change the situation, stop, distract, or change the environment. Separate the children, draw their attention to something else, tell them to stop what they are doing.

2. **Define the behaviour.** Be clear about what the child is doing that is not OK. Describe what you see to the child. The more specific and clear you can be about what they are doing wrong, the better the opportunity they will have to change or relearn their behaviour.

3. **State the rules.** Tell the child how you expect them to behave, or repeat rules you have previously told them – for example:

- “The rule is...”
- “We expect everyone to respect each other’s privacy, and that includes not touching each other on the genitals...”

Be direct but don’t lecture.

4. **Enforce the rules.** For younger children, you can redirect or distract the child to more appropriate behaviour. End the encounter on a positive note and praise the child when they act in the way you suggest.

B2.

3 Cavanagh-Johnson, T. (2015) *Understanding Children’s Sexual Behaviors – What’s Natural and Healthy*. Holyoke, MA: Neari Press.

B2.1 Preparing for the conversations

In preparing to talk to each child individually, think about how you will have these conversations and whether any child(ren) will face any barriers in communicating with you.

There are many reasons why the children may find it difficult to talk to you about the incident.

A child who has been harmed may, for example:

- feel **embarrassed or ashamed** by their experience
- feel **responsible** for the harm
- fear that they will **not be believed** if they tell
- be **threatened or manipulated** by the child who has harmed them
- fear **the reaction of adults** – the child may think they will lose control of what happens next, or may bring shame to their family or community
- fear other consequences of telling, such as **alienation** and/or **bullying** from their peers, damage to their **reputation**, or having to **move to a new school**
- not have the **language** or the **capacity** to communicate verbally, or not know how to tell
- **not recognise their experience as abusive** – this can be especially significant if the child thinks “This is just part of school life” or “Others have it worse than me”.

A child who has harmed may, for example:

- feel **embarrassed or ashamed** by their behaviour
- be afraid of what will happen (in terms of punishment within the school or from their parents, and/or the involvement of police and social workers) if they **accept responsibility** for their behaviour
- fear other consequences of accepting responsibility, such as **alienation** and/or **retribution** from their peers, damage to their **reputation**, or having to move to a **new school**
- not have the **language** or the **capacity** to communicate verbally, or not know how to talk about it
- **not recognise their behaviour as abusive** – this can be especially significant if the child thinks “This is just part of school life” or “Others do worse things”.

A child may find it particularly difficult to talk about their behaviour if they have themselves been sexually abused.

Some children may face additional barriers based on their age, social class, culture and belief, ethnic background, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or disability – or a combination of those characteristics. Professionals may make assumptions about them – for example, by assuming that a boy has sexually harmed because ‘boys will be boys’ rather than considering the possibility that his behaviour indicates he himself has been abused.

Be prepared for the children – whether they have harmed or been harmed – not to maintain eye contact or acknowledge everything you say when you meet. They are likely to be experiencing considerable stress, embarrassment or shame, but don’t interpret their demeanour as meaning that they are not listening.

Reflection point

How do you feel about having conversations about harmful sexual behaviour? Is there anything you might find difficult? Chapter 1 of our [Communicating with Children Guide](#) contains advice to help you.

Depending on the nature of the sexual behaviour, the Designated Safeguarding Lead may initiate a referral to children's social care and/or the police. If this happens, you need to bear in mind that the police may interview the children formally about what has happened. Our [Communicating with Children Guide](#) contains advice on holding conversations with children following sexual abuse/harm, with Chapter 6 focusing on questions you can ask and should not ask.

B2.2 Speaking to a child who has been harmed

Find out **how the child is feeling**. They may be scared, embarrassed or need reassurance.

Let them know they are **not to blame** for what has happened to them.

Accept and validate what they tell you. For example, you could say, "I hear what you are telling me."

Find out what **the child's wishes** are; ask what you can do to help them to feel safe.

Let them know your **next steps** – remain **open, honest and transparent** about the actions you will need to take, and be clear about what information you are going to share with whom. This will be in your school policy. You may need to tread a fine line between respecting the child's confidentiality and meeting your safeguarding responsibilities.

Let them know that they can **keep talking to you** whenever you are available, and tell them who else they can talk to when you are not.

Make a record, as soon as possible, of what the child has said in **their own words**; do not try to interpret their words. It is also useful to note how the child presented, their non-verbal communication and their body language.

The Department for Education's statutory guidance [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#) says:

96. Where there is a safeguarding concern, governing bodies, proprietors and school or college leaders should ensure the child's wishes and feelings are taken into account when determining what action to take and what services to provide.

97. The school's or college's safeguarding policies and procedures... should be transparent, clear, and easy to understand for staff, pupils, students, parents, and carers. Systems should be in place, and they should be well promoted, easily understood and easily accessible for children to confidently report any form of abuse or neglect, knowing their concerns will be treated seriously, and knowing they can safely express their views and give feedback.

Nevertheless, some incidents will **need to be escalated** regardless of the child's wishes. You must talk to your Designated Safeguarding Lead if you have any concerns.

Reflection point

What barriers might the children face in talking to you about their experiences? How might you help them to overcome some of these barriers? Chapters 2, 4 and 5 of our [Communicating with Children Guide](#) explain the barriers that children may face, and contain detailed advice on conducting a conversation.

B2.3 Speaking to a child who has harmed

Be clear about **what you have seen, heard or been told about**.

“Sameera has told me that you pushed her against the wall in the toilet and touched her breasts under her clothes.”

Be clear that **this behaviour is not OK**, and explain why it is not OK.

“This behaviour is not acceptable, and sexually touching anyone without their consent is sexual assault.”

Be clear that harmful sexual behaviour may have **consequences**.

“Sexual assault is a criminal offence and may be reported to the police.”

Give the child the opportunity to **talk to you about their behaviour**.

“Can you help me to understand what happened?”

Open a door for them to **talk to you about anything that is worrying them**.

“I am here if there is anything you would like to talk to me about.”

Clearly explain your **next steps**.

“I will need to speak to your parents about this. Is there anything you would like me to know before I do that?”

The child may **deny** or try to **minimise** their behaviour; some level of denial is common. The child is likely to be experiencing a range of emotions including fear and shame, and it is important to hold in mind the possible reasons for their behaviour. You may want to ask them questions such as:

“I’ve noticed you doing X. Some people have different words for this – I wonder what you call it?”

“I’ve noticed you doing X. I am interested in whether you have seen this somewhere?”

“I noticed you doing X. Do you want to tell me about that?”

“I have noticed you doing X. I am interested to know if you have heard about this anywhere?”

“I have been told you have [describe specific reported behaviour]. Can you help me understand what happened?”

Might the child be being, or have been, sexually abused themselves? If you think so, you can use our **Signs and Indicators Template** [🔗](#) to build a picture of your concerns.

B2.4 Talking to children about your communication with their parents

Some children may be scared to know that you will be speaking to their parents about sexual harm or sexual behaviour. Some children may find the idea incomprehensible – especially if their family follows a religion or culture which forbids sex outside marriage or considers sexual contact to bring shame on the family. Think carefully about how to manage this situation and speak to the child about anything that is worrying them.

If you think there is any possibility that **the child will at additional risk from their own family** if you talk to their parents about their having been sexually harmed or having sexually harmed someone else, you must consider making a referral to children's social care and/or the police.

B2.5 Talking to children about communications and social media

When you speak to any of the children involved, remind them to maintain discretion about the incident – this includes not speaking to others, even if they are encouraged to do so, and not sharing information via social media.

Advise them what to do if others try to elicit information, or if they become aware of any unhelpful social media communication.

Check that they know how to block and report messages or shared content that may be harmful.



Speaking to the children's parents

The parents of all the children involved will need to know what has happened, and these conversations may feel challenging. However, as an educator you will be experienced in having difficult conversations, and will probably have developed many strategies for managing them. This section gives some further suggestions which may be useful to you in different situations.

B3.1 Speaking to the parent(s) of a child who has been harmed

When it is discovered or suspected that a child has experienced harmful sexual behaviour, it is important for their parent(s) to know **how the school plans to support the child**.

Some of this support will depend on the context of the behaviour (e.g., whether it has happened inside or outside school), but there are some general actions that you can take to support the child and their parent(s).

The parent(s) will appreciate being told **how their child is coping** at school, and being given positive news – if the child has participated well in a lesson or activity, for example – as well as being told how any distress has been managed.

Reassure the parent(s) that the school will support their child through its **pastoral systems**, rather than going down a disciplinary route if the child displays any problematic behaviour because of their experience. Let them know that the trauma of sexual harm may affect their child's working **memory**, and previously embedded learning may be significantly compromised. And tell them they you will be developing a **learning recovery plan** to support the child.

Our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#)  contains information about the needs of parents whose children have experienced sexual harm, and how you can help meet those needs.

B3.2 Speaking to the parent(s) of a child who has harmed

A non-judgemental approach is crucial in providing a supportive response to the parent(s) of a child who has harmed, especially as **they may feel to blame** for the child's behaviour. If they have experienced sexual abuse themselves, they may have a strong emotional reaction to hearing what their child has done, and may be angry with their child or the child who has been harmed.

To build a better understanding of **the parent(s)' needs**, it may help to ask questions such as "What do you need help with?" or "What are you most worried about at the moment?"

Research suggests that a child is more likely to address their harmful sexual behaviour when their parent(s) **hold them accountable** for the behaviour but **continue to support them**. This can feel like a delicate balance to strike, so the parent(s) may value advice on how best to offer that support.

At the start of the meeting, **agree the terminology you will use**. Families use lots of different words when referring to sensitive body parts, so agreeing terminology will help normalise your discussions and help promote a more comfortable conversation.

"You may have taught your son/daughter some specific words for genitals, but I will refer to the genitals by using terms such as 'penis' or 'vagina'."

Explain what their child has done and what will happen next

Be **clear and factual** in the information you share. Give the parent(s) as much information as you think is appropriate without compromising the child(ren) who have been harmed. Use clear language, accepting that talk of harmful sexual behaviour can be very difficult for the parent(s) to hear. When describing **what has been reported/observed**, keep to the facts and avoid being judgemental.

“A girl in your son’s class said that he grabbed her breasts over her school shirt when they were in the playground at break-time. She said he held his hand there for about five seconds, despite her telling him to get off and attempting to get away.”

The parent(s) may **struggle to believe** what you are telling them – as it is so far removed from what they know of their child – or **fail to accept the harm that has been done**. Stay calm and **give them time** to assimilate the information you provide; it may be useful to have a number of conversations with them, as they may find it difficult to take in anything you say following the shock of the initial information.

Be prepared for the parent(s) to express a range of emotions, possibly including **denial** or **anger**. Reassure them that you will work with them to **ensure their child is safe**, and to ensure their child’s schooling can continue as normally as possible.

Explore the reasons for the behaviour

It’s important to find out what you can about the child’s **lived experiences**, and their parent(s) may be able to provide valuable information. Explore together whether there are any **risks to the child** within the family or in the community.

*“I wonder if you have any concerns about him/her/them acting sexually?
Perhaps you were unsure about it or didn’t know who to speak to about it?”*

“I appreciate that this may be hard for you to hear, and I wonder if you can think of any reason why they might have behaved in this way?”

Reflection point

Children who display harmful sexual behaviour often have other difficulties in their lives, such as experience of physical or sexual abuse or neglect, witnessing domestic violence, a lack of positive male role models, or having a parent(s) with mental health or substance abuse issues. It is important to consider what the child’s experiences might be, and whether a referral to children’s social care may be needed.

You may need to explore the child’s home life in some detail (if, for example, you have concerns that the parent(s) give the child unrestricted internet access), in order to establish whether anything at home may have contributed to their behaviour.

The physical environment at home

Find out which **adults and other children live in the child’s home**, and consider whether the child may be at risk at home from sexual abuse, neglect, physical abuse, domestic abuse, parental substance misuse, etc.

The online environment at home

Most children have access to a device through which they can connect to the internet. And much communication between children takes place online, via **social media** and other platforms. To establish how safe the child is in their online environment, spend time understanding the child's **use of technology**.

- What **devices** does the child have access to? Are any **parental controls** set up, and how often are they checked?
- Do the child's parent(s) check in with their child about their internet use? Do they discuss the child's social media profiles and content? Have the parent(s) taken any steps to **manage the child's use of technology**? Have they noticed any change in the child's presentation after **prolonged periods of time online**?
- **How much time** does the child spend using their devices? Do the parent(s) **supervise or monitor** this at all?
- Are there concerns that the child's use of technology is **placing them at risk** (from being harmed online or engaging in behaviour which may harm others)?
- **Is the child worried** about their online activity?
- Do you know whether the child is accessing **pornography**? Regardless of whether pornography was a feature of their harmful sexual behaviour, try to understand what influence pornography has had or is having on them.

Reflection point

Many children access pornography, yet adults are often reluctant to ask about this. Discuss this with the child's parent(s). Do they face any particular challenges in talking to their child about the child's viewing of pornography? Do they ask about it only when there is a specific reason to do so? Do they feel able to engage with their child on this topic in a meaningful way? Where might they get support to have these conversations? Some sources of information and support are listed in **Appendix 2**.

Discuss next steps

When telling the child's parent(s) what will happen next, **focus on the child's behaviour** – not the child – as the concern. Using **clear and non-blaming language** will reduce the likelihood of a defensive reaction from the parent(s):

“When there is an incident of harmful sexual behaviour between pupils/ students, the school has a responsibility to assess the seriousness of the behaviour.”

Outline the **possible outcomes** – these may range from an explanation that the child's behaviour is not appropriate, and that the school's disciplinary procedures are necessary, through to a referral to children's social care and/or the police.

And remember to discuss:

- how the school will **support the child** – for example, by making a referral to a specialist agency, allocating a mentor in school, or working on education about healthy relationships and safe touch. Let the child's parents know who, in the school, will be responsible for each action.
- how you can **help support the parent(s) themselves** – this is likely to involve giving them a contact phone number so they can have a direct link with a member of school staff (often but not always the Designated Safeguarding Lead) who knows the details of the situation, and telling them where they can access support themselves; see **Appendix 2**.

B3.3 Minimising the risk of unhelpful conversations and conflict between parents

When a child has sexually harmed another child or children, both/all sets of parents are likely to experience a range of emotions. Problems may arise, both at school and in the community, if they share (potentially inaccurate) information about the incident or the school's response. To minimise the likelihood of such problems arising:

- Ensure, during your initial meetings with the parents, that **everyone has clear and accurate information** about what has happened.
- Agree with the parents **how you will share information with them** moving forward. At this stage, consider whether any parents have had **difficulty understanding or remembering** the information that you have shared; fear or confusion from lack of understanding may cause anger. Remember to share **positive news** with the parents, such as examples of positive behaviour that their child has displayed.
- **Avoid using minimising or blaming language** about *any* of the children involved. It may take time to establish the facts of what has taken place, and it is important to maintain a **non-judgemental stance** in relation to every child, while acknowledging the feelings of all parents.
- Ask the parents whether they feel you could be **doing anything more**. If they think that action is not being taken, they may decide to deal with the situation themselves. It is important to remind the parents what you have done, and to be very clear about what you will do next.
- Ask the parents to **respect the confidentiality** of all the children involved.

B3.4 Talking to parents whose first language is not English

As early as possible, establish what language the parents (and the child, when in their parents' company) prefer to communicate in, and arrange interpretation/translation services accordingly.

- If they are reluctant to use interpreters, try to find out why; girls/women may be uncomfortable speaking through a male interpreter (as may boys who have been sexually harmed by males), and the parents may (especially if they live in a small ethnic/cultural community) may have concerns around confidentiality.
- Avoid having family members, neighbours or friends translating or speaking on the child or parent(s)' behalf.
- If you are using an interpreter, talk to them about the possibility that the parents' language may not have words for sexual abuse/harm. Prepare them for the sensitive nature of the conversation to be had.
- For informal communication with the parents, Google Translate isn't perfect but it works fairly well.

If you are communicating with the parents in English, use simple language – if the parents have limited English language skills, they will be more likely to understand the gist of your message if you speak slowly and avoid slang, idioms and analogies.

Always ask whether what you are saying has been understood. Remember that someone may say “Yes” to this and still not understand what is being said, because they don't want to look stupid or they fear negative consequences. Ask them to say back to you what they think you have said, as this will show whether they have really understood you.

Assessing the risk of further harm

In considering the risk factors below, the Designated Safeguarding Lead may engage external partners to undertake a more formal assessment of risk.

How likely is the behaviour to reoccur?

In thinking about how likely the child who harmed is to engage in further harmful sexual behaviour, consider the following questions:

- What are the child's **circumstances?** (For example, are they known or thought to be at risk of harm from others in their home, in the community or at school? Are any negative or antisocial influences affecting their behaviour? Or do they have a stable and loving home environment and positive social influences?) Children with more protective factors are less likely to display harmful behaviour.
- For **how long and how frequently** has the harmful sexual behaviour been going on? Repeated incidents of harmful behaviour (whether all against the same child, or against multiple individuals) may suggest that further harmful sexual behaviour is more likely.
- **How many children** have been harmed? How old were they, and what sex(es) were they? The child may have an entrenched pattern of behaviour, and may be seeking to have their underlying needs met in unhealthy or maladaptive ways.
- Has the harmful sexual behaviour occurred in the context of an **existing friendship**, or has the child harmed one or more children with whom they previously had **no connection?**

If any of this information has come to light during discussions with the child, you may want to revisit the notes made in section A1 and consider whether their sexual behaviour should be recategorised.

While it is less common for a child displaying harmful sexual behaviour to target **school staff** in addition to other children, it does happen; consider the risk of this in the context of what you know about the child's behaviour and the characteristics of children they have harmed.

Where and when might the risks be greater?

Are there any known patterns in the timing and/or location of the harmful behaviour, which may be helpful to consider when you are developing a safety plan?

If a child has sexually harmed in the school toilets, for example, special toileting arrangements may need to be considered for them. Or, if there are concerns that they could be at risk from others as a consequence of their harmful sexual behaviour, arrangements for their transportation to and from school may need to be considered.

- If there are **risky times** – such as during specific lessons such as PE, transitions, break times, or before/after school – why are these times risky? Is it to do with lack of supervision? Is the child more likely to be triggered in certain environments, during certain activities, or around specific other children?
- If there are **risky places** – such as particular classrooms, quiet areas, the school toilets, the playground, out-of-sight areas, hallways, or other locations off-site or online – what measures can be put in place to minimise any risks in these environments?

A child who has displayed harmful sexual behaviour and other concerning behaviours may be struggling to **regulate their emotions**. Monitoring their

emotional state is essential, especially around **times of difficulty or possible stress** such as before exams, when exam results are shared, while completing assignments, or when changing class/year group.

Are there any restrictions on the child?

If the police investigate a child's alleged harmful sexual behaviour, they may impose bail conditions restricting what the child can do and the contact they can have with other people. Ensure you understand what these, or any other legal orders, mean.

Section **B7** contains advice on managing incidents when there is an ongoing police investigation.



Managing contact between the children

In formulating the safety plan, the staff team (led by the Designated Safeguarding Lead) will need to ensure that the child(ren) who have been harmed feel as safe as possible, while the child(ren) who have harmed are not isolated from positive activities. It may be necessary to take steps so that they will not come into contact.

Supervision

You may want to impose a higher level of supervision, at least initially, on the child who has harmed. This will ensure the safety of the children involved, and provide time to assess how the child is responding to being made aware their behaviour is unacceptable. To consider the need for additional supervision, ask yourself:

- Does the child who has harmed have the **internal controls to manage their behaviour** in different situations? Think about whether there is any evidence that they may have compulsive or impulsive behaviours.
- Are there **times of the school day** when the risks are higher or lower?
- What supervision and monitoring might be needed at **unstructured times**, such as break times or movement between lessons?

Bear in mind, though, that the child should be able to do as much of their usual routine as possible, albeit under supervision. Try to ensure that they can still engage with their peers and in extracurricular activities, under discreet supervision at these times (through the staff member maintaining a line of sight with the child from a distance, for example).

Managing offsite contact

It is likely that you will also need to think about contact and safety during offsite school trips or on school transport. Are there any particular concerns in relation to school transport? If harmful sexual behaviour is thought to have happened on the school bus, for example, consider whether alternative arrangements can be made to transport the child who has harmed to and from school.

Managing contact in specific types of school

Residential schools

If the children involved in the harmful sexual behaviour are normally together outside school hours, actions you can take to manage contact between them include:

- identifying members of the boarding staff team who can be available so that each child has a trusted adult during boarding/residential hours
- considering the need for additional supervision, including the use of waking night staff, during evenings and weekends
- identifying alternative sleeping arrangements, if necessary, to create distance between the children
- establishing routines for showering, changing, and going to the toilet (including during the night)

- planning for both/all children to have fair access to activities during social times, especially if there is limited choice of activities during evenings and weekends
- making arrangements for the children's travel to/from home at the end/beginning of the week or of term – if they use local public transport services, for example, can they be directed to particular parts of the bus/coach or to separate carriages on the train?

Small schools

It can be particularly challenging to keep children apart if the school environment is small and/or the school has one-form entry, but there are still actions you can take – such as **staggering** arrangements for the child who has harmed at the start and end of the day, and at break times, if this is proportionate and will support all involved.

Think about whether safety and wellbeing can be maintained while keeping both children **in the same classroom**:

- This may be achievable by moving desks or chairs so the children are not seated near one another, and by increasing supervision within the classroom – although staffing levels may make this impossible.
- If safety cannot be maintained with both children in the same class, think about moving the child who has harmed to another class (i.e. a different year group's class) temporarily. You will need to explain to the child's parents of this child – and to the child themselves, if appropriate – that this follows your national statutory guidance (see page 6) and does not indicate guilt or blame. The situation should be kept under constant review.
- If the ongoing level of risk to another child in the school is so great that it cannot be managed safely within the school environment, you may need to consider an alternative provision for the child who has harmed.



Arrangements to consider including in the safety plan

This section lists a wide range of arrangements that can be considered to ensure children's safety following an incident of harmful sexual behaviour. Bear in mind, however, that interventions should be **proportionate** and at **the lowest possible level** – each child should have as much flexibility and control in their school life as safety permits.

B6.1 Arrangements in and around school

The arrangements suggested below may be useful for any or all of the children involved. The aim is to create additional safety measures and 'distance' between the child(ren) who have been harmed and the child(ren) who have harmed, until the arrangements can be safely reduced or adjusted within agreed timeframes.

They should be considered within the context of the harmful sexual behaviour that has occurred. If they are adopted, there should be clear timescales for review and careful consideration given to scaling them down based on progress made.

a) At the start and end of the school day

- Greet parents and children at an agreed entry point to the school that is different for each child – or, if there is only one viable entrance, at a different time for each child.
- Agree transport arrangements for children who may share a school bus or normally walk the same route into school – can these be done with a friend or buddy? Would a bus seating plan work? Ask the child who has been harmed what would help most, and bear in mind that supervision on school and public transport is limited.
- Find out whether the parents or other family members provide transport to and from school for the child who has harmed over a fixed period.
- Agree where both/all children will be if there is 'free time' at the start or end of the day, or if they arrive at school earlier than planned.
- Have a special job or activity that the child can do, possibly with their trusted adult or a buddy, if they arrive early.
- Check in with the child at regular times, and particularly at the end of the first few days of the safety plan. Make sure they know when and where this will happen. 'Check-ins' should be discreet, especially if the child feels they are being overly supervised or attracting too much attention from other children.

b) During the school day

- Identify a separate safe space (such as the next-door classroom, reception, or a learner support area) for each child to go to if they feel upset or stressed, and think about supervision during these times.
- Be prepared for the child to have moments of dysregulation, distraction or distress; think about calming strategies that you can teach the child to use during these times.
- Arrange for the child to have a fidget item/sensory toy or a pre-prepared calm box they can use, or to listen to music while doing independent study.

- Agree how the child can discreetly leave lesson activities if they feel upset or stressed; for example, let the child leave a card on their desk or the teacher's desk, or have a 'code question' that indicates they need some time out. Be clear about where they need to go at these times, and whether supervision is required. Older children may make use of a social space, gym or library. Consider how any instances of the child leaving their learning will be followed up, so that issues can be addressed swiftly and the child does not need to leave their learning frequently.
- Tell the child who in the school knows about what has happened (e.g. class teacher, head of year, safeguarding leads), and who they can speak to in school if they need adult support.

c) If the children continue to share the learning space

- Put a seating plan in place, and explain the reason for this to both/all the children involved. The child who has been harmed may want to sit near a window, the door or next to a friend.
- Have a seating plan for assemblies, in the lunch hall, for extra-curricular activities and anywhere else.
- Be extra vigilant when children move to group or paired work, or collect equipment from their trays. For example, trays may need to be rearranged if they are too close.
- Provide a buddy for each child so they feel included in group work and activities.
- Review cloakroom arrangements – are the children's pegs too close together?
- Arrange additional supervision or allocated cubicles/blocks when the children are visiting toilets or changing for PE.
- Consider additional supervision and monitoring of online learning spaces, particularly where children can communicate with one another.

d) If the children are not sharing the learning space


- Where possible, allocate the child who has harmed to another class in their year group for a fixed period.
- If this is not possible, it may be appropriate to move them to another class for a fixed period. In most instances it would be preferable for this to be in the year group above.
- Maintain contact between the child and their original class teacher, who should check their progress in their learning during this time. This will support a positive reintegration to their own class and help the child stay on track with their learning.

e) During less structured times

- Consider how the child may access personal items stored elsewhere in school (if they are collecting an instrument for a music lesson, for example).
- Direct the child to specific activities at lunch and break times.
- Have a plan for indoor break times when poor weather limits options.
- Ask peer mentors to support the child during lunch and break times.

- Guide supervisory staff to engage with the child during break times.
- Identify any areas on the school site where there is reduced supervision (including CCTV coverage), and direct one or both/all children to stay away from these areas for all or part of the school day, such as during break times.
- Ensure additional lunchtime supervisory staff are aware of areas where the child should not go.

f) Curriculum and timetabling

- Arrange for each child's trusted adult to review their timetable with them, initially every day and then once a week, to identify subjects or lessons which may be triggering. The trusted adult may need to anticipate these times, in case the child forgets or is unaware of upcoming lesson content.
- Make subject teachers aware of issues so they can prepare before the lesson. This is especially important if both/all children remain in the same class, or if a child is likely to struggle with the lesson content (e.g. in a lesson about relationships and sex).
- Consider additional arrangements if a supply teacher is needed in a subject where potential issues have been identified. Can a more experienced teacher cover the lesson instead?
- The safety plan may need to include reference to the school PSHE or RSHE⁴ curriculum, saying what will be put in place to support the children in accessing these lessons. The Department for Education has produced **RSHE teacher training modules**  which include content on safeguarding and ensuring that the right staff are available to support when sensitive topics are being taught. Is there a case for the child who has harmed to have additional support through one-to-one sessions for some RSHE content?
- Think about arrangements for any upcoming significant school events such as educational trips, visits, award presentations or performances.

g) Mobile devices and social media

If mobile devices or social media have contributed to the harmful sexual behaviour, or could exacerbate the situation, it may be necessary to ask the child to deposit and collect their mobile phone from a designated member of staff at the beginning and end of the day.

- Reassure the child's parent(s) that any urgent messages can be communicated through the school office. Consider sharing a school mobile number for times when the school office is busy.
- Encourage the parent(s) to engage routinely with the child to monitor their use of devices and report any harassment or abuse.

On the other hand, it may be helpful for the child to have access to a mobile phone during the school day (so they can access frequent support from their parents, for example). Be aware of the possible consequences of this: if there is an incident in school, for example, the child may call home before they tell you about it. Think about how you might manage this – including by supporting family and friends who may struggle to deal calmly with information they receive.

⁴ In Wales the equivalent terms, as set out in the 2022 curriculum guidance, are Health & Well-being and Relationship and Sexuality Education. For simplicity, in this document we adopt the terminology used in England.

B6.2 Other support mechanisms

- Is a referral to the school counselling service appropriate?
- Would it help if your school police liaison officer spoke individually to the children involved? The parents would need to be made aware beforehand, and support put in place for children with additional needs so they fully understand what is being said.
- If the child who has been harmed agrees to this, would it be appropriate for the trusted adult to 'check in' with one of their close friends who is aware of their situation?

B6.3 Suggestions to share with parents

The child's parent(s) may also appreciate knowing that they can support their child by:

- reminding them which school staff know about their situation, and which ones they can approach if they want to talk to someone or are feeling upset
- making them a 'calm box' (e.g. items they can keep in their pocket and take out for comfort)
- reviewing the lessons that they have coming up during the week, and assessing whether any of these will be difficult for them
- checking whether they are finding any particular times of day or activities (such as lunch breaks or PE classes) difficult.



Managing incidents alongside a police investigation

There are particular challenges in managing an incident of harmful sexual behaviour that is the subject of a police investigation. Information from the police during the investigation may be limited, and many police investigations conclude with no further action.

The matter may be complicated if the incident took place off the school premises; the parents of the child who has harmed may not appreciate why the school is getting involved.

Good decision-making relies on your school responding sensitively to a range of social and environmental factors while taking account of statutory guidance and best practice.

This section sets out some guiding principles for you to consider when there is an ongoing police investigation.

Launching a police investigation

When the police begin an investigation, the initial stages (a first interview by police) are generally completed promptly. What happens next is subject to regional variations, and no two cases are the same.

We recommend that you collaborate closely with your partners, who may include the Local Authority Designated Officer, police liaison officer, children's social care, youth justice services, the local authority communications team, and other relevant behaviour or child support services in your authority. It's also important to keep your Safeguarding Governor/Trustee informed.

Start considering how, during the investigation, the school can:

- deliver education to both/all children as safely as possible, considering both the short- and long-term impacts of the investigation
- maintain confidentiality while swiftly challenging any rumours or misinformation (see section [A3](#))
- provide reassurance and support to both/all families.

Consider too how the investigation's outcome may affect both the children involved and the wider school community.

During a police investigation

While the police's investigation is ongoing:

- make sure you are clear about any restrictions that the police have placed on the child
- communicate with the investigating officer/team via your police liaison officer, and maintain this contact even if the investigating officer continues to provide only limited information
- have a clear point of contact for the child's parent(s) throughout the investigation, and explain to them that you are working within the parameters of your school protocol/policy (see [Appendix 1](#)) and your national statutory guidance (see page 6).

Implement the **safety plan** once the police have made their initial enquiries, and ensure that the investigating officer is among the key partners invited to the safety planning meeting for the child.

If a child's access to the school site has been restricted, ensure that the plan for their education entitlement is well supported by regular check-ins with a staff member whom they trust; this will support their eventual integration back to school.

You will need to consider what scope you have for reviewing and scaling back the arrangements in the safety plan while the investigation is ongoing.

If the police investigation concludes with a decision to take no further action

If the police decide not to investigate a case of harmful sexual behaviour, or if their investigation does not result in a prosecution or out-of-court disposal, it is important to remember that **this does not mean the incident didn't happen** – it just means that the police or the Crown Prosecution Service think it is not in the public interest to pursue a conviction, or think an offence cannot be proved 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

You still need to understand what has happened and take action to minimise the risk posed by the child who has harmed.

The Designated Safeguarding Lead can ask the police to share the information they have obtained during their investigation; the police have a duty to do so if it will avoid unnecessary harm to any of the children involved.

If a child is being prosecuted for harmful sexual behaviour

The police have many options available to them in concluding an investigation, including **cautions** or **referrals to youth offending services**. If they use any of these, the Designated Safeguarding Lead should consult with the police, children's social care, and youth offending services to get advice on managing potential risks posed by the child. For example, find out whether the child has had a formal risk assessment (such as an AIM3 assessment) as part of proceedings; if they have, ask for any recommendations that have been made.

If a child's behaviour has reached the threshold for **criminal prosecution**, the Designated Safeguarding Lead should establish whether this affects the school's understanding of the risk posed by the child in school. **The child should always be enabled to complete their education, whether within their original school environment or under alternative arrangements.**



Reducing and phasing out the safety plan's arrangements

One purpose of a safety plan is to provide support to a child who has harmed so they can return to normal school routines. The child's progress should be reviewed regularly to establish whether there is evidence of reduced risk and how the child is working to prevent any further incidents of harmful sexual behaviour; this may involve reviewing their compliance with the safety plan, and their and their parents' engagement with any interventions offered.

The review should be led by the Designated Safeguarding Lead, and include other relevant school staff.

It is also important to monitor the wellbeing and progress of the child(ren) who have been harmed.

Supervision

If the safety plan has placed one or more children under an increased level of supervision, this should be kept under constant review.

Increased supervision is usually difficult to sustain for long periods, and often impairs a child's ability to experience normal healthy social interactions with peers or develop healthy relationships with others. Furthermore, it typically places the responsibility for controlling the child's behaviour with adults, not with the child themselves – this means that, once the supervision is eventually lifted, the child has no experience of taking responsibility or controlling their own behaviour so their behaviours are likely to remain risky.

Bringing the plan to a close

It is important to hold in mind that children are able to change their behaviour – and, with support and guidance, the risk of further harmful sexual behaviour occurring can reduce. As stated above, any safety plan should be kept under regular review to consider what additional measures are needed to manage the risks and what support is needed for the children involved.

In assessing whether the risks are sufficiently reduced for a safety plan to be ended:

- the school's safeguarding records should be reviewed
- the parent(s) of the child(ren) who have harmed, and any key professionals supporting the child(ren), should be consulted – these may include their class teacher(s), social worker(s) and youth offending worker(s), for example
- the child(ren) who have been harmed should also be consulted to ascertain their views and wishes.

Consider the following questions in relation to each child who has harmed:

- Do they continue to display any concerning attitudes/behaviours towards the child(ren) who have been harmed?
- What do they say about their previous behaviour? Do they recognise why it was harmful? Many children deny or minimise their harmful sexual behaviour, typically out of shame and fear of being judged. The safety plan should not necessarily be prolonged because the child denies or minimises their harmful sexual behaviour, provided there are no other concerns in relation to their current behaviour and engagement with the plan.

- How have they responded to the safety plan? Have they been compliant and responded to instructions?
- Have they engaged in any intervention to address the harmful behaviour? Is there evidence that they are utilising any key skills/knowledge taught during the intervention? Have their parent(s) supported the intervention?
- What is known about their current behaviour in school, at home and in the community? Is there evidence of risky behaviour, which may raise concerns about potential further harmful sexual behaviour occurring?
- Are there any concerns in their environment (home or community) that may be undermining their engagement with the safety plan and intervention?
- What are the views of the child(ren) who have been harmed?
- Would ending the safety plan create any risks to the child who has harmed? For example, might they be targeted by other children?

If there are ongoing concerns about any of these points, it may not be appropriate to end the safety plan fully – but perhaps it could be maintained with additional measures which are proportionate to the assessed level of risk.

If it is assessed that a safety plan is no longer needed, it may be appropriate for the child(ren) who have harmed to trial attending school without a safety plan over a time-limited period, after which the situation can be reviewed. This will enable their progress and behaviour to be monitored. During the review period, the school's expectations – and the possible consequences (e.g. reintroduction of the safety plan) if there is further behaviour of concern in future – can be outlined to the child and their parents.

If the child(ren) move to a new school while the safety plan is still 'live'

When a child who is the subject of a safety plan moves to a new school (because they are transitioning from primary to secondary school or moving home) before the plan has been brought to a close, relevant safeguarding information and the safety plan should be shared with the receiving school to ensure that any identified risks are managed. Typically your Designated Safeguarding Lead will arrange a meeting with their counterpart at the receiving school.

Bear in mind that a child who has harmed may transition to a school which a child they have harmed also attends or will attend in future. The receiving school should review the safety plan with any other relevant agencies before the child starts at their school.

Supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities

It is important to be alert to common characteristics of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)⁵ which put them at **greater risk of sexual harm**. These can include:

- depending on others to provide intimate care
- reaching developmental milestones at a different pace to their peers
- having a speech, language or communication difficulty that affects how they express their needs
- not understanding that what they are experiencing is sexual harm.

These issues can be exacerbated if **professionals or parents**:

- perceive a child with SEND as having high levels of protection and support, and therefore being at a lower risk of sexual harm
- attribute escalating or challenging behaviour to the child's condition without considering that sexual abuse may be happening
- withdraw the child from PSHE/RSHE lessons so they miss out on the expertise of the teacher and on conversations, group discussion and class-based activities that can all underpin learning.

Talking to a child with SEND

Children with SEND who are sexually harmed, or who display harmful sexual behaviour, may need additional support. When you engage with them, use interventions that they are familiar with and are typically used to aid their learning. These might include reducing environmental stimuli and using:

- simplified language
- an additional adult or learning mentor to provide support
- sign language or Makaton
- prompt cards with symbols, photographs or pictures
- social stories
- technology-assisted devices.

Make sure you have a clear understanding of how the child's needs may affect their comprehension, communication and engagement. You may need to engage a specialist colleague (such as their learning mentor or your school's Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) to help facilitate conversations.

Before your first meeting with the child about the harmful sexual behaviour:

- Identify the key messages you want to convey, and plan how you will secure the child's understanding of these.
- Consider how you will gain the child's views in advance of the safety planning meeting – it may be better for their key worker to talk to them about this.

⁵ In Wales the equivalent term is additional learning needs (ALN). For simplicity, in this document we adopt the terminology used in England.

- Think about how additional adults can be available to support the child, and whether there are any access, equipment or resources requirements. You may need a larger meeting space if there will be additional adults in the room.
- Think about the seating arrangements, so the child will not be crowded.

During every meeting you have with the child:

- Have water available and allow for a break; if appropriate, you can ask the child to show/signal for a break at any time.
- Keep whatever you need to facilitate the conversation (such as props, prompt cards, illustrations and fidget toys) close at hand.
- Check the child's understanding as you go along, not just at the end of the meeting.
- Be prepared to repeat yourself. If the child is particularly stressed by events, they may find it difficult to engage; this does not necessarily mean they are not listening or do not understand.
- Do not expect the child to maintain eye contact or always acknowledge what you are saying. The additional stress, embarrassment or shame of the situation may limit this, so it should not be interpreted as showing a lack of interest in what you are saying.

After each meeting:

- Agree with the child's parent, carer, and/or key worker how the messages from the meeting will be communicated to the child to further support their understanding, both at home and school.
- Children with SEND may need more regular monitoring to help them access all the support intended for them – make sure these are diarised and not left to incidental 'catch-ups'





Appendices

Developing a protocol/policy on responses to harmful sexual behaviour

While this resource can assist your response to individual incidents of harmful sexual behaviour, it's best practice for your school to have a clear protocol/policy in place which can guide your decision-making; typically this will be part of your school behaviour policy, and should include possible interventions for low, moderate, and serious incidents.

Think ahead and discuss **issues for your setting**. For example:

- How might the needs of children be managed in a range of different scenarios?
- Can you try to establish a reciprocal agreement with a neighbouring school to host a child temporarily, if necessary?
- And how might you communicate with the school community about an incident in a way that provides reassurance, limits gossip and rumours, prevents escalation, and maintains positive relationships?

This discussion can help generate ideas and offer solutions that may not be easily identified when you are in the throes of managing a highly charged incident.

You should also seek **external input** to the protocol/policy:

- Discuss the management of harmful sexual behaviour in your professional networks – what have other Designated Safeguarding Leads put in place, and can you share practice?
- What does your Local Authority Designated Officer recommend? Can they share insights from other schools? Can they link you into your local authority communications team?

The protocol/policy must, of course, be underpinned by and implement statutory guidance and advice from the Department for Education or the Welsh Government (see page 6). Once it has been written, share it with your police liaison officer or community policing team.

The protocol/policy can be added to and reviewed over time. This might be a continuing professional development activity or an agenda item for a Senior Leadership Team meeting, for example.

Useful resources and organisations

The resources listed here, including some produced outside the UK, provide particularly helpful information for you, for children and for parents.





Advice and support for education professionals

The **Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support Service** [↗](#), run by the Marie Collins Foundation and SWGfL, is for professionals (and especially Designated Safeguarding Leads) working with children in England.










Resources for education professionals

Title	Produced by
<u>Children and Young People Presenting with Harmful Sexual Behaviours: A Toolkit for Professionals</u> ↗	The Children's Society (2018)
<u>Information for Professionals on Supporting Children and Families after a Child Has Been Abused</u> ↗	Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma Loss and Grief Network
<u>Recognising and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour Displayed by Young People in Sport</u> ↗	NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (2022)
<u>Beyond Referrals: Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) and Extra-familial Harm (EFH) in School Settings</u> ↗	Contextual Safeguarding Research Programme, Durham University
<u>Supporting You to Deliver Education and Raise Awareness of Online Child Abuse and Exploitation</u> ↗	National Crime Agency: CEOP Education
<u>Understanding Sexualised Behaviour in Children</u> ↗	NSPCC
<u>Sharing Nudes and Semi-nudes: Responding to Incidents and Safeguarding Children and Young People in England</u> ↗ <u>and in Wales</u> ↗	UK Council for Internet Safety
<u>Technology Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Children and Young People</u> ↗ (video recording of a webinar)	Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (2021)
<u>Children and Young People Who Engage in Technology-assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour: A Study of Their Behaviours, Backgrounds and Characteristics</u> ↗	NSPCC (2017)
<u>Technology-assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour</u> ↗ (podcast)	NSPCC (2021)
<u>Engagement with Support Services for Ethnic Minority Communities</u> ↗	Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2021)

Information and advice for children and young people

Title	Produced by
<i>Advice for Young People</i>  (on topics including 'Am I being abused?' and 'Abusive teenage relationships')	The Children's Society
<i>Jessie & Friends</i>  (a game and videos to help children aged 4–7 to learn about online safety)	National Crime Agency: CEOP Education
<i>Band Runner</i>  (a game and videos to help children aged 8–10 to learn about online safety)	National Crime Agency: CEOP Education
<i>The Internet, Relationships and You</i>  (advice for 11–18-year-olds about online safety)	National Crime Agency: CEOP Education
<i>Helping a Friend</i> 	Childline
<i>Mental Health: How Can I Help Someone Else Seek Help?</i> 	MIND
<i>Going to Court</i> 	Victim Support

Organisations for children and young people

Organisation	Details
<i>The Mix</i> 	Support and advice on a range of topics.
<i>Brook</i> 	Advice on sexual health and wellbeing.
<i>Coram Voice</i> 	Support for children in care and care leavers.
<i>Look Ahead</i> 	Support for young people who have been in care or had problems at home, to help them develop the skills and confidence they need to live independently.
<i>Muslim Youth Helpline</i> 	Culturally sensitive support to Muslim young people under 25 in London; outreach services including family mediation, face-to-face counselling and befriending.
<i>National Youth Advocacy Service</i> 	Information, advice, support, advocacy and legal representation for children and young people who are or have been in care.
<i>Runaway Helpline</i> 	Helpline for children who are thinking of running away, have run away, or are worried about someone else running away
<i>The Ollie Foundation</i> 	Suicide awareness charity providing confidential help and advice to young people and anyone worried about a young person; services include suicide awareness and prevention training, and free weekly online mental health support sessions open to all young people.
<i>Marie Collins Foundation</i> 	Support for children abused online and their families.

Resources for parents

Title	Details	Produced by
<u>Harmful Behaviour in Young People and Children</u>	Information for parents whose children have displayed harmful sexual behaviour.	Parents Protect
<u>Harmful Sexual Behaviour Prevention Toolkit</u>	Advice for parents on creating a safe home environment and talking to their children about topics such as pornography and healthy relationships	Lucy Faithfull Foundation (2022)
<u>The Internet and Children... What's the Problem?</u>	Advice about online risks and helping children to stay safe online.	Lucy Faithfull Foundation
<u>What's the Problem?</u>	A guide for parents of children found to have been engaging in concerning activity online.	Lucy Faithfull Foundation (2017)
<u>Online Safety Guides for Parents</u>	Information about how to help children stay safe on social media.	NSPCC
<u>Social Media Facts and Advice</u>	Information to help families navigate the risks and rewards that social media can bring.	Internet Matters
<u>Help Your Children Get the Most Out of the Internet</u>	Advice for parents on keeping children safe online and addressing concerns	National Crime Agency: CEOP Education
<u>Still We Rise</u>	A parent's guide to identifying the signs of gender-based violence, understanding the trauma it causes, and offering effective support.	Women and Girls Network (2020)

Organisations supporting parents

Organisation	Details
<u>Acts Fast</u>	Emotional and practical support for parents and family members of children who have been sexually abused.
<u>Marie Collins Foundation</u>	Support for children abused online, and for their parents and families.
<u>K Y'GHUbX</u> <u>fÆ:fa Yf miAcgUWL</u>	Practical and emotional support for parents of sexually abused children, including through a confidential helpline.



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The photographs in this publication
were taken using actors and do not
depict actual situations.