



# Responding to harmful sexual behaviour in older children

A guide for staff in secondary schools and colleges

## 1. Understanding the behaviour

The early teenage years are the peak time for harmful sexual behaviour, most of which is displayed by boys towards girls). However, it may be displayed by young people of either sex and any gender identity, and it can occur in same-sex relationships.

Harmful sexual behaviour exists on a spectrum, from inappropriate through to abusive and violent; your response should be proportionate to the nature and severity of the behaviour. All behaviour outside the normal range requires a response, and your setting's designated safeguarding lead/professional must always be informed.

Remember that many young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour have a history of adverse childhood experiences and family difficulties. This does not excuse their behaviour, but it should inform how you respond. **Ask yourself:** could this child have been sexually abused themselves?

Always consider making a referral to children's social care, for both the child(ren) who have been harmed and (if you have concerns about them) the child who has displayed the behaviour. A safeguarding response may be required.

## 2. Having the conversation

When speaking to a child about their behaviour, be **clear**, **direct** and **non-judgemental**.

- Be specific about what you have seen, heard or been told: "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 acceptable and explain why: "Sexually touching anyone without their consent is sexual assault."
- Explain that there may be serious consequences: "Sexual assault is a criminal offence and may be reported to the police."
- Give them the opportunity to talk: "Can you help me understand what happened?"
- Open a door for them to share anything that may be worrying them: "I am here if there is anything you would like to talk to me about."
- Explain what will happen next: "I will need to speak to your parents about this. Is there anything you would like me to know before I do that?"

### 3. What to do next

Inform the designated safeguarding lead/professional about what you have observed and/or been told.

Record what happened using the child's own words and your observations. Do not interpret or add your own conclusions.

Speak to the child's parents calmly, factually and without judgement. They may experience shock, anger, guilt or disbelief. Give them time to absorb the information, and be prepared for more than one conversation.

Develop a safety plan that considers where and when the behaviour occurred, what may have triggered it, and how supervision can be adjusted. Involve the child, so they have ownership of it.

Consider whether a referral is needed to children's social care, the police and/or a specialist service. The severity and context of the behaviour will determine this.

For more detailed advice, see our practice resources:

- [\*Signs and indicators: A template for identifying and recording concerns of child sexual abuse\*](#)
- [\*Safety planning in education: A guide for professionals supporting children following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour\*](#)

### 4. Important reminders

Focus on the behaviour, not the child. Use clear, non-blaming language when speaking to them and their parents.

Avoid punitive responses, as these are unlikely to help change behaviour. The goal is accountability, understanding and support for change.

Most children who display harmful sexual behaviour do not go on to commit sexual offences as adults.

**Early, proportionate intervention can make a significant difference.**

If a police investigation does not proceed, or does not result in a conviction, the child who was harmed may feel disbelieved. Reassure them: "This does not mean we don't believe what happened. It is not your fault. We will continue to support you."