

Sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that can be harmful

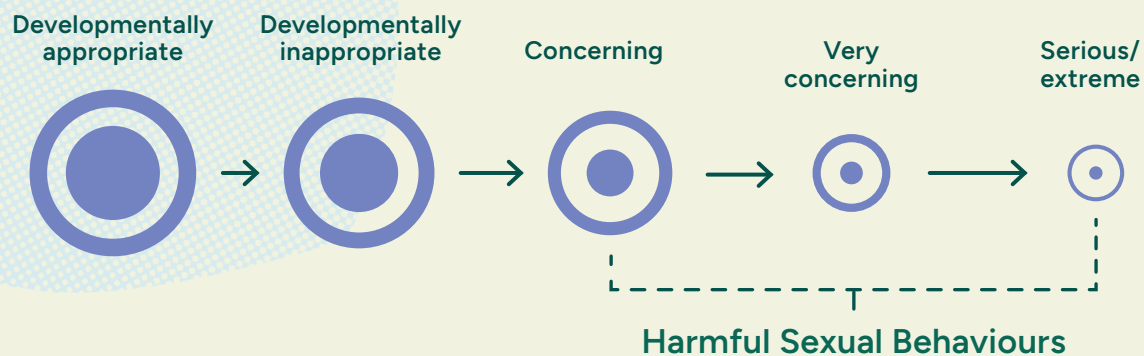
Content warning:
This material contains
information that may be
distressing for readers.

When we talk about a *child*
or *young person*, we mean a
person aged **under 18 years**.
We recognise and acknowledge
the diverse backgrounds,
ethnicities, abilities, and
genders of children.

What is harmful sexual behaviours?

Sexual development and exploration is a normal part of childhood and adolescence. Not all sexual behaviours are harmful or concerning.

It can be useful to understand sexual behaviours across a continuum:¹



The term Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB) is used to describe sexual behaviours displayed by a child or young person towards another child or young person. The statistics show this form of sexual abuse is increasing and causing significant harm.²

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study³ found 18.2% of Australians aged 16-24 (nearly 1 in 5) experienced sexual abuse by an adolescent (generally a person aged 13-19) before the age of 18. Sexual abuse of those under 18 years by another person aged under 18 years falls within the definition of HSB. This form of HSB mostly occurs against females and is perpetrated by:

- male adolescents the victim knew, and who were not their current or former boyfriend
- current or former boyfriends.

Most children and young people who display HSB do so against other children and young people that they know. This includes people they know but are not in a relationship with, people that they are in a current or previous relationship with, and siblings. A smaller number of children and young people who display HSB target other children and young people they don't know.⁴

The data shows that:

- Males are more likely to use HSB than females, but most males do not use HSB
- Children tend to engage in HSB from around 12 years of age
- It is rare for the use of HSB to be related to a sexual disorder or a sexual attraction to children, although some children and young people with intellectual and developmental disability use HSB as an expression of their disability
- Some children and young people who display HSB have traumatic childhood experiences
- Most children and young people who receive appropriate treatment, supervision and support will stop using HSB.



What behaviours are we talking about?

Sexual behaviours of children and young people are not static, they change over the life course and according to context⁵ which includes a range of developmental, family and social factors.

Sexual behaviours can be considered harmful when some of the following characteristics exist.

The sexual behaviour:

- falls outside what is considered developmentally, socially and culturally expected
- causes harm to themselves or others, involves coercion, lack of consent or manipulation
- involves and misuses power that exists between the children and young people
- is unwanted or not consensual.

HSB can take many different forms and does not always involve physical contact.

Here are some examples:

- forcing another child or young person to view pornography
- forcing another child or young person to watch sexual acts, such as masturbation
- 'sexting' or sharing sexual content with another child or young person when it is not wanted or asked for
- forcing another child or young person to send sexual content such as images across social media platforms or through their phones
- inappropriate or unwanted kissing
- compulsive masturbation
- touching another child or young person in a sexual way
- putting their genitals into another child or young person's mouth
- putting their penis, fingers or other objects in a child or young person's vagina or anus.



Why do children and young people display these sexual behaviours?

There is no universal profile of children and young people who display HSB. Although several general pathways have been identified,⁶ each individual pathway is unique to the child or young person's circumstances.

For some children and young people, HSB may be related to coping with difficult or traumatic childhood experiences such as disrupted relationships, poor family functioning, experiences of abuse and violence, and social isolation. Children and young people can experience distressing and difficult thoughts and emotions that are beyond their ability to cope with and HSB may be an attempt to have these needs addressed.

Research evidence is emerging that certain conditions (or factors) are often present when a child or young person displays HSB:⁷

1. Having thoughts, feelings and emotions related to difficult or traumatic experiences that are beyond the child or young person's ability to cope with
2. Contextual factors such as being influenced by peers or others with negative attitudes towards females, being exposed to pornography, or being pressured by their peers to have sex
3. Lack of preventive factors such as insufficient positive sexuality and relationship education, guidance and support.

Children who display harmful sexual behaviour may not recognise that what they are doing is inappropriate or harmful.

It's not helpful to call people who display HSB 'perpetrators', 'abusers' or 'offenders' due to the stigma associated with these terms.⁸

It's important to recognise that it's the behaviour that's harmful, not the child.⁹



Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources designed to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours. You can access these at: [Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse](#).

If you need support, please contact:

Lifeline - 13 11 14

13YARN - 13 92 76

1800RESPECT
1800 737 732

Blue Knot Helpline and
Redress Support Service
1300 657 380

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

¹ [Continuum for Understanding Harmful Sexual Behaviours - Paton & Bromfield](#)

² Mathews B, Finkelhor D, Pacella R, et al. Child sexual abuse by different classes and types of perpetrator: Prevalence and trends from an Australian national survey. *Child Abuse Negl* 2024; 147: 106562. 20231207. DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106562.

³ <https://www.acms.au/>

⁴ Mathews B and Contos C. New research shows some gains but fresh difficulties in combating child sexual abuse. *The Conversation*

⁵ Coates D, Fernandes C, Krzyzaniak N, et al. Building a knowledge frame for responding to the needs of children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. 2023. The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, Australian Childhood Foundation.

⁶ Gemma McKibbin, Julie Green, Cathy Humphreys & Matt Tyler (12 May 2023): Pathways to Onset of Harmful Sexual Behavior, *Victims & Offenders*, DOI:10.1080/15564886.2023.2208579

⁷ Coates D, Fernandes C, Krzyzaniak N, et al. Building a knowledge frame for responding to the needs of children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. 2023. The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, Australian Childhood Foundation.

⁸ First Commonwealth Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2024

⁹ [Harmful sexual behaviour: Supporting children and teenagers who have engaged in it - Raising Children Network](#)