

Engaging Parents and Carers in HSB Responses:

Practice Guidance for Practitioners

Aim:

This fact sheet supports practitioners to strengthen how they engage parents and carers when working with children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). It translates findings from the CHANGE research into practical guidance to help practitioners recognise barriers to family participation, respond effectively to families in crisis, and support safe and meaningful involvement in therapeutic work.

Problem Statement:

Engaging parents and carers as therapeutic partners in HSB responses is essential because they are the most powerful ecological influence on children's development and can become a key protective factor and agent of change (Campbell et al., 2020; Shields et al., 2020; Yoder, 2014; Yoder & Brown, 2015; Yoder & Ruch, 2015). Previous Australian study indicates that less than half of surveyed HSB practitioners (36–44%) work with the family system, demonstrating an ongoing gap (Quadara et al., 2020).

Parents and carers experience the discovery of HSB as an acute crisis that destabilises family functioning and, particularly in sibling HSB, may require urgent practical changes (e.g., living arrangements) alongside ongoing therapeutic support to understand HSB, address family and environmental contributors, and support children through treatment (Cain et al., 2026; Campbell et al., 2020; Hackett & Masson, 2006; Lewin et al., 2025).

Funded by the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, the research project CHANGE - Curtailing Harm and Navigating Growth, Evidence for change pathways of young people who displayed harmful sexual behaviour, is conducted by the University of Wollongong (UoW), in partnership with New Street Services, an NSW Health specialist therapeutic service for 10–17-year-olds who have displayed HSB.

CHANGE found that young people whose parents or carers participated in the counselling program with them were much more likely to complete counselling than those without parent or carer participation (Kor et al., 2026). This suggests that parent and carer engagement is strongly linked to whether counselling is sustained long enough to make a difference.

Barriers to parents/carers participation:

What is often described as parent or carer “reluctance” to engage commonly arises from stigma, shame and fear of judgement, highlighting the need for non-judgemental, flexible responses that are tailored to families’ immediate needs and contexts (Hackett & Masson, 2006; Hackett et al., 2015; Kor et al., 2023; Quadara et al., 2020).

In CHANGE, parents described:

- Feeling shocked, overwhelmed, and “an out of body experience” after being told about their children had engaged in HSB.
- Feeling blamed by statutory services such as child protection or police.
- Significant impacts on mental health, including depression and burnout.
- An experience of trauma that impacted across generations

Some parents described how their own histories of abuse shaped their reactions:

“I didn’t realise that I was projecting what had been projected on me as well... as a parent, to not take it personally and to realise that this behaviour can have many complexities.”

Enablers to parents/carers participation:

- Recognise reluctance as often rooted in shame, stigma, trauma, or prior negative experiences with services. Work actively to engage parents and carers as partners, not as bystanders.
- Offer practical support (flexible appointment times, transport, clear communication) to facilitate participation.
- Use non-stigmatising, developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed language and practice.
- Provide emotional support to parents and carers in their own right, not only as extensions of the child’s counselling.
- Attend carefully to safety, especially where domestic and family violence (DFV), abuse by a parent/carer, or complex family dynamics are present.

Actions for practice:

- Do not exclude children from counselling when parents/carers are initially fearful, reluctant, or unable to participate.
- Carefully assess parents/carers capacity to engage in counselling with their children.
- Parents/carers can be engaged in different ways (e.g., having a dedicated counsellor for them, joint sessions with the child, individual sessions, and home visits).
- Engage parents/carers in safety planning to enhance safety within the family/home environment.
- They should also be involved in goal setting and other interagency work, recognising them as the expert of their children.
- Recognise that parents/carers, with the right support, can be both protective factors and agents of change.

- Meaningful parent/carer participation must be carefully planned in the context of domestic and family violence and gendered dynamics, with services prioritising safety for young people and adult victim-survivors, rigorously assessing DFV-perpetrating carers' readiness, deliberately engaging often "invisible" fathers and male caregivers.

Reflective questions for practitioners and services:

- When a parent or carer appears reluctant, how could this be explored in a respectful, non-judgemental way?
- What practical supports (transport, flexibility, childcare, etc.) could your service offer to reduce barriers to participation?
- How does your current practice attend to the needs of siblings and the wider family system, not just the child who harmed?
- In what ways could your service better support fathers or male caregivers to engage safely and meaningfully?
- How do you currently assess safety when domestic and family violence or other harmful family dynamics are present?

References:

- Cain, S., Yates, P., Mullins, E., & Adams, A. (2026). Sibling sexual abuse: What do we know about professional responses? Stage 2 analysis of a 2-stage scoping review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 171, 107808. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107808>
- Campbell, F., Booth, A., Hackett, S., & Sutton, A. (2020). Young people who display harmful sexual behaviors and their families: A qualitative systematic review of their experiences of professional interventions. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 21(3), 456-469. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018770414>
- Hackett, S., & Masson, H. (2006). Young people who have sexually abused: What do they and their parents want from professionals? *Children & Society*, 20(3), 183-195. <https://doi.org/10.1002/CHI.873>
- Hackett, S., Masson, H., Balfe, M., & Phillips, J. (2015). Community reactions to young people who have sexually abused and their families: A shotgun blast, not a rifle shot. *Children & Society*, 29(4), 243-254. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12030>
- Kor, K., Hanley, N., Fabrianesi, B., Simpson, H., Finlay, S. M., Spangaro, J., Allan, J., & Payne, J. (2023). Engaging young people and their caregivers in support services following harmful sexual behaviors: Qualitative analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 139, 106128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106128>
- Kor, K., Langfield, C., Brown, M., Hackett, S., Spangaro, J., Allan, J., Cameron, J., & Finlay, S. M. (2026). Community-based therapeutic programme for harmful sexual behaviour: the role of parents and carers. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2026.2709692>
- Lewin, T., Black, B., Socolof, M., & Talmon, A. (2025). The parental experience and emotional response to sibling sexual abuse: When a parent's most valuable gift becomes a source of trauma. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 162(Pt 3), 107079. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107079>
- Quadara, A., O'Brien, W., Ball, O., Douglas, W., & Vu, L. (2020). Good practice in delivering and evaluating interventions for young people with harmful sexual behaviours (Research Report No. 18/2020). ANROWS.

<https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/good-practice-in-delivering-and-evaluating-interventions-for-young-people-with-harmful-sexual-behaviours/>

Shields, J. D., Coser, A., Beasley, L. O., & Silovsky, J. F. (2020). A qualitative examination of factors impacting family engagement in treatment for youth with problematic sexual behavior. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 108, Article 104597. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104597>

Yoder, J. R. (2014). Service approaches for youths who commit sexual crimes: A call for family-oriented models. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, 11(4), 360–372. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2014.897108>

Yoder, J., & Ruch, D. (2015). Youth who have sexually offended: Using strengths and rapport to engage families in treatment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(9), 2521–2531. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-0054-x>

Yoder, J. R., & Brown, S. (2015). Challenges facing families of sexually abusive youth: What prevents service engagement? *Victims & Offenders*, 10(1), 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2013.875969>

Yoder, J. R., Hansen, J., Lobanov-Rostovsky, C., & Ruch, D. (2015). The impact of family service involvement on treatment completion and general recidivism among male youthful sexual offenders. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 54(4), 256–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2015.1025177>