

# Developmental and Harmful Sexual Behaviour Continuum at a Glance

## Developmentally Expected Sexual Behaviour

Mutual and consensual, play based, children/young people have similar ability levels. Easily redirected. Family and social context is generally safe and supportive.

## Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Harmful Sexual Behaviour is an umbrella term that captures children and young people under 18 years of age who engage in sexual behaviour/s that fall outside the range typically accepted as 'normal' for child/ young person's age and level of development (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017). It is a term that acknowledges the seriousness of the behaviour together with the impact it has on the child or young person and others. Harmful Sexual Behaviour may occur in any setting (in person and/or via technology) and can be self-directed or directed towards others.

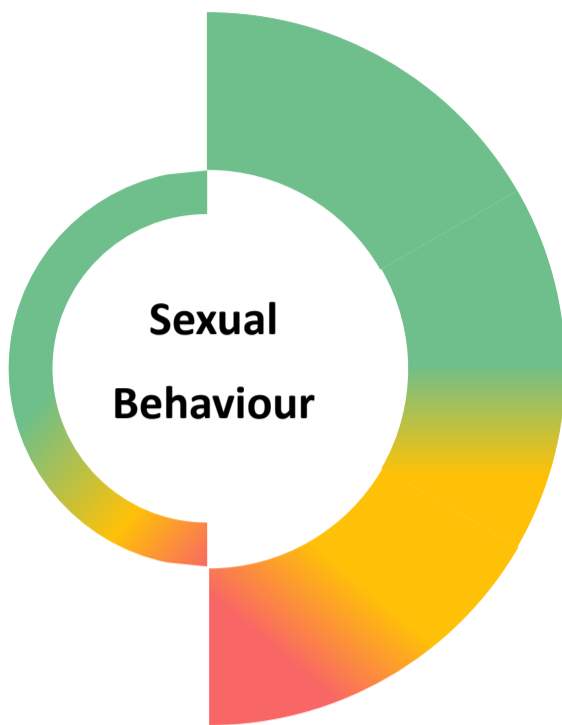
### Concerning/Problematic

Consent is unclear. Contact may involve an imbalance of age, size, power, and status. Behaviours may be socially unacceptable or developmentally unusual.

### Abusive

Use of coercion and force or violence, secrecy, manipulation, power imbalance in age, size, power, status and/or understanding of behaviours.

(This resource does not provide a guide for when behaviours can be considered 'Adolescent Sexual Offending'.)



## A note about Language

The language we use to describe children and young people is important and can have wider consequences.

It is important that the behaviour children and young people engage in is not pathologised or placed within our traditional understanding of why adults engage in harmful sexual behaviours.

Stigmatising language can have long-term impacts on children and young people and terms such as 'perpetrator', 'predator' or 'paedophile' should never be used to describe a child, young person or their behaviour. Doing so may prevent them from being able to engage in activities that may be therapeutic and reduce ongoing risk. Best practice is to describe the actual behaviour using clear, concrete and objective words, e.g., "touching his/their penis/vagina".

The preferred language is 'child/young person engaged/ing in harmful sexual behaviour'.

## Reflection on our values and beliefs

We are all sexual beings. However, when we talk about infants, children and young people engaging in sexual behaviour, we can become very uncomfortable and our personal values, attitudes and beliefs may affect how we interpret and respond to the behaviours.

Beliefs and attitudes can be unconscious and emerge when we are confronted with a behaviour and/or situation that can be challenging - making objectivity almost impossible to achieve.

Sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours can be a challenging topic to discuss and there is a danger that strong emotional reactions could override our rational decision making.

As individuals, it is important that we meet the needs of children and young people by responding in a calm and non-judgemental way, seek our own personal support and not ignore behaviours we are worried about or don't understand.

## Self-reflection

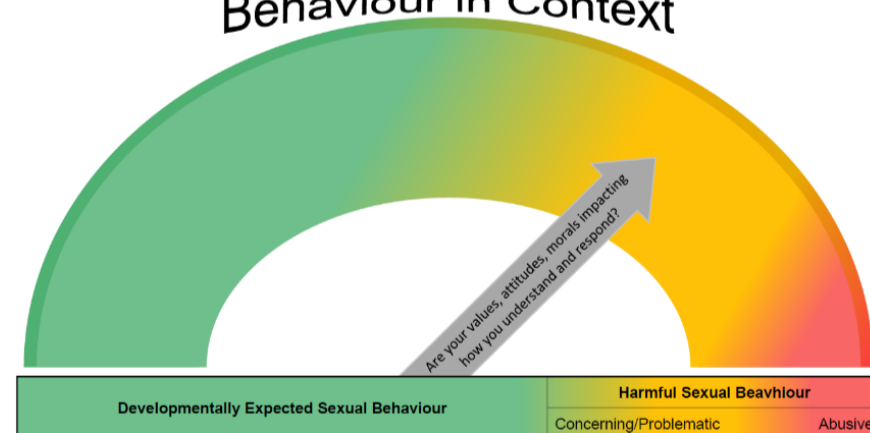
When hearing/talking about sex, sexuality, and sexual abuse/harmful sexual behaviour, consider:

- Am I being triggered?
- Are my personal values, attitudes and beliefs impacting on how I:
  - Recognise?
  - Understand?
  - Respond?

If so, what do I need to do to provide a balanced response and consider the behaviours from the child's perspective?

- Am I considering the context in which the behaviour is occurring?

## Behaviour in Context



Consider, what is the 'need' driving the behaviour?

It's important to keep in mind, children and young people's sexual knowledge and vocabulary are not the same as an adult. The reasons why they may engage in harmful sexual behaviour is also not always the same as adults'.

Child sexual development, like all development, occurs within complex cultural, social, familial and psychological contexts. It is important to consider what the presenting behaviours might indicate. Consider a child/young person's age, adverse experiences, care history, level of factual information around sex and sexuality, and their social, physical, language and cognitive abilities.

Other contextual information for consideration includes where the behaviour is occurring (private, public, technology), if it involves another individual/animal, and the frequency and persistency of the behaviour.

# Developmental and Harmful Sexual Behaviour Overview

## Developmentally Expected

- A term used to describe a behaviour that is in keeping with the young person's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development.
- A developmental process that continues over the course of childhood and is influenced by biological, psychological, social, and environmental factors.
- Purpose of the behaviour often relates to curiosity about same and opposite gender body parts and sex.
- Childhood sexual exploration usually occurs without pressure.
- The behaviour does not cause physical or emotional harm to the young person and/or others.

## Characteristics

- Generally curious in nature.
- Occurs between equals in age, size, ability (developmental stage).
- May be of the same and opposite gender.
- No power/status difference.
- No intent to cause harm.
- Not intrusive.
- Not frequent.
- May have feelings of embarrassment and/or guilt.
- Redirected easily/responds to adult intervention.

## Recognise / Understand

- Are the behaviours in context of the child/young person's general curiosity and exploration of the world?
- Is there a real or perceived power imbalance between those involved?
- Are the behaviours spontaneous and/or play based?
- What is capacity/comfort level of the carers to respond to and redirect the behaviours in a calm and caring way?

## Respond (overarching)

- Developmentally expected behaviours serve as opportunities to educate about healthy sexuality, consent, and appropriate boundaries.
- A simple and direct conversation, using age-appropriate language, regarding body development and sexual activity (e.g., old enough, consensual, in private and not with others in the family) etc, may be enough to prevent further concerns.

## Harmful Sexual Behaviour

- An umbrella term used to describe any sexual behaviour/s expressed (in person and/or via technology) by those under the age of 18 years old that are:
  - developmentally inappropriate,
  - may be harmful towards themselves, or
  - be abusive towards another young person, adult and/or animal.
- Best understood as an umbrella term that includes any sexual behaviour that is concerning/problematic, abusive, and/or an offence.
- Behaviours across this continuum vary considerably and are impacted by a variety of factors. These include developmental delays, trauma experiences of young person involved, exposure to adult sexual activity/material, family norms and attitude (immediate and extended), the context (social and cultural) within which the person is residing and the behaviour occurs, persistency and frequency of behaviour, level of secrecy and level of coercion, power, and control.
- Behaviour often occurs to meet some unconscious unmet need e.g., connection, safety, comfort, affection etc.
- Behaviours across this continuum increases risk of further sexual exploitation by others.

## Characteristics

- Developmentally inappropriate.
- May be harmful towards themselves, or others.
- Dissimilar age, size, ability (developmental stage).
- Non-consensual and may involve level of cohesion/threat.
- Secretive.
- Frequent and/or persistent/excessive sexual behaviours involving oneself, others, and/or animals.
- Coercive, aggressive, degrading, violent.
- Limited or/no response to adult redirection/intervention.

Please note: Only one of the above characteristics needs to have been present for it to be concerning.

## Recognise / Understand

- Are the behaviours concerning and/or persistent that may undermine other developmental tasks?
- Are the behaviours causing harm/abuse to self/others involved?
- Do the behaviours involve threat, actual violence, coercion or secrecy or shame?
- What might the behaviours indicate? (e.g., poor boundaries, lack of sexual education, a desire for relationship or desire to inflict harm on self or others?)
- What are their unmet needs? (e.g., connection, safety, comfort, affection, knowledge etc.)
- What additional resources will need to be put into place/secured for required support and supervision plans?

## Respond (overarching)

- Individual therapeutic support may help to address the underlying cause of the behaviour (e.g., unmet needs, own experience of abuse).
- Tailored support provided to the carers and system around the child/young person.
- Support and Supervision planning (including clear house rules, appropriate pro-social peer activities etc).

### Keep in mind:

- Any behaviours outside of the developmentally expected range, or that is persistently beyond what is usual for an individual, always needs investigation/understanding.
- All children and young people can be negatively affected by concerning or harmful sexual behaviour including those who have engaged in the behaviour; those who were on the receiving end of the behaviour; and those who witness the behaviour.
- It is also important to note, children and young people can also be harmed by adults failing to fully understand and respond appropriately and proportionately to the identified behaviour.
- This is a guide only and all behaviour should be considered in the context of general developmental stages/ages. Always seek specialist advice and support for individual situations.