

Preventing Harmful Sexual Behaviour

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What is harmful sexual behaviour

Sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people ranges from experimentation that unintentionally goes too far, through to serious sexual assault.

Most children who sexually harm others are adolescents but even very young children may display sexually worrying behaviours. When this is the case it is important to find out what might be happening in the child's life for him/her to behaving in this way.

Our Parents Protect website has more information about [how to identify the warning signs](#) of harmful sexual behaviour. This site also goes into detail about what is [age-appropriate sexual behaviour](#).



Why is this a bigger picture right now?

Harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people is especially important during the extraordinary times of the coronavirus pandemic where many families have had to isolate together in lockdown conditions.

Families, both adults, and children are spending more time online; this has been vital to staying connected to family, friends, and loved ones, and has been positive for people's mental health. Unfortunately, there remain some risks to being in a closed environment with certain family members, and also to being online, especially for children and young people.



Increased use of the internet

Parents and carers might be worried about how much time their children are spending online, what they are doing, and who they are connecting with. Some might be worried about older children spending a lot of time alone in their rooms or younger children engaged in more unsupervised playtime.

Parents and carers might be wondering if their children are completely safe, and what they can do to protect them better.



Dangerous online behaviours

Ofcom has recently reported that online use has increased dramatically since coronavirus has forced everyone to stay at home. Adults in the UK are thought to be spending more than a quarter of their waking day online, and there has been a surge in services such as Zoom as people try to stay connected, and the use of sites such as Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok are being used by almost all older children aged 8-15.

Concerns about these platforms include children and young people accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content and receiving unwanted sexual messages. The Internet Watch Foundation has reported that they have blocked at least 8.8 million attempts by UK internet users to access videos and images of children suffering sexual abuse during lockdown.

Since we know that a third of those who have engaged in abusive or harmful sexual behaviour are themselves under the age of 18, it is important for parents and carers to consider whether their own children could be responsible for engaging in any of these behaviours either in person or online.



How to keep children safe?

The government's measures to respond to the coronavirus pandemic have put increased pressures on families, especially where parents are juggling work commitments alongside their children's educational and welfare needs. This could mean that unsupervised play, both in-person and online may have increased, and young people might be spending more time alone online.

Parents and carers need to be mindful of the behaviours their children are engaging in, both with siblings for example, or online – whether that be inappropriate touching, or creating harmful online content, such as sending indecent messages.

By giving parents and carers the right information and support, they can be equipped to address any concerns they might have, and take positive steps to prevent harmful sexual behaviour from happening in the first place.

The next page will provide you with tips on how to create a safe home environment for your family, showing them where they can go for advice and support.



Open communication

- Communicating openly with your children about a wide range of topics, including healthy relationships and staying safe can start from a young age.
- Taking some time each day to ask how your children are, whether there is anything on their mind or anything they would like to talk about, can help children and young people to open up and communicate better. This could be when you say goodnight or when they get home from school.
- Children and young people need to be able to trust you enough to reach out to you when things go wrong, or if they are worried about something. Fostering this from an early age will help your child know that you love and care for them even when they have made mistakes, and this may make it more likely that they would come to you when they are troubled.
- Talking provides an opportunity to help your children understand what makes a safe and loving relationship, and to know what makes it unsafe and unhealthy. If no one helps them understand the difference, they will find it difficult to develop the skills to know if they are a victim or the one causing harm.



Keeping all lines of communication open

It is important to keep lines of communication open with your children and make sure they know they can come to you with their worries. However, this can sometimes feel too hard.

Talk to your child about where else they could go for help and support. Do they have other trusted adults they could talk to? Do they know about the organisations that are there for them? Show them the [Childline](#) or [Kooth](#) websites, so they know where they are if they need them.

- If you or your child are worried about something that has been said through social media, they can report the person or post to the social media platform. Ask them what sort of thing they might want to report in the future.
- Ask your children if they know how to report something on social media. If they say yes, get them to show you, if not then it's an opportunity to learn together. For a 'how to' guide for different websites, check out the information on [Thinkuknow](#).



Create a safe environment and respond to concerns

- Creating a home environment that is calm, where adult relationships are modelled in a healthy, loving way will help teach children and young people to respect others.
- Reducing stress and conflict in the home can create a more stable environment where children are less likely to engage in harmful behaviours.
- Young people need to feel like someone has their back even when things go wrong. You can correct your child's behaviour while also showing how much you love and care for them.
- Expect that your children will make mistakes, you can guide them back on the right path.
- It is important that your child knows you are always there to support them in life if ever they find themselves worried or pressured by anyone or any situation. This can give them the confidence to come to you at any time without fear of being judged.
- When children come to you with concerns about what they may have experienced, seen or done, it is important to help them put things right and make positive changes.
- It is okay to seek support if you are unsure how to respond. The Stop It Now! helpline advisors are there to support and guide you. Call on 0808 1000 900 or use our [live chat](#).



Create a safe environment and respond to concerns

- Being overly restrictive of your children's internet use or responding to concerns by banning all technology can put them off coming to you with concerns in the future. Instead, help your children by talking them through their worries, helping them to navigate difficulties and setting realistic and healthy boundaries around their internet use.
- Creating positive rules that the family understands and stick to, can prevent harmful behaviours. For example, keeping certain doors open, requiring privacy when bathing or changing clothes, charging devices in the kitchen overnight or playing in spaces that can be observed.



Providing education

- Children and young people will naturally have questions about sex and relationships as they grow up and start to mature. They might want to seek these answers out online, so making sure that they have access to reputable sources to find these answers is important, as well as knowing that they can talk to you. Starting these conversations off when they are young can make it easier to support your children's healthy sexual development.
- Whilst your children's knowledge of technology might be better than yours, you do know how to initiate and maintain relationships. You can help your children to develop a healthy suspicion of others and help them understand 'red flags'. For example, someone who tries to get them to break the law, do things they don't want to do or isolate them from their friends and family.



Providing education

- You can educate yourself on understanding the dangers and risks related to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour, both online and offline. Understanding what this is, how it happens, and knowing some of the signs and indicators can help you become more aware of the behaviours you see within your own home, and addressing them if necessary.
- When talking to your child about these issues, it is important to include information about risks, consequences, and the law. Using interactive resources available online to explore these issues in age-appropriate ways with your children can reinforce their understanding.



Balancing rights and responsibilities

- You can help your children to understand their rights and responsibilities, especially when they are online. Encouraging them to think about how they can be kind online and reassuring them you will be there if they need any help. It is important to remember that a child is never responsible if an adult grooms and manipulates them online.
- Respecting young people's privacy, especially as they move into adolescence, whilst still supporting and encouraging them. This helps them take responsibility for their own behaviours



How to talk to your children about sex and relationships

- Start talking to your children from a young age about relationships, and staying safe.
- Think about what messages you want to convey to your children about sex, and sexuality.
- Consider how you conduct your own relationships and what messages young children in your life are learning from your behaviours. Children will take in more from actions and behaviours that they see, than from what they are told, especially if these messages are inconsistent.
- Think about using age-appropriate interactive resources that help children and young people learn about sex, relationships, consent, the law and staying safe.
- Children will be naturally curious about sex and relationships as they start to develop and mature, and will have questions that they might feel embarrassed to ask you as their parent or carer. You can make sure your children know about reputable sources online where they can get accurate and up-to-date information about these issues.



How to talk to your child about pornography

- Speak with your child about sexualised content online, including pornography, particularly as they move towards adolescence. The reason for this is that many children and young people are exposed to this kind of content, and some may actively seek it out. This could involve talking in an age-appropriate way about what pornography is, why people look at it, what the dangers can be in looking at it, as well as how it differs from real-life relationships.
- Use reputable resources that help young people understand what healthy sexual relationships look like.
- It is illegal to show pornographic material to anyone under 18, but helping them make sense of what they may have already seen is really important.



How to talk to your child about pornography

- Talk to your child about how they feel about online sexual content they have seen, find out what it means to them, whether they value it or not and whether there are other ways to meet their needs.
- Some young people turn to pornography to learn about sex, as it is so easily accessible. Encourage them to instead visit websites to explore sex and relationships for themselves, such as the resources available on [Brook](#).
- Inform yourself about what type of sexual images are illegal and explain the consequences of accessing illegal sexual material.
- Learn about pornography addiction. This might be helpful if your child has been viewing pornography regularly and is saying that they don't know how to stop.



Online social worlds

Remember that young people's online and offline social worlds are often enmeshed and cannot be easily separated.

- Promote the benefits that technology can bring to relationships and recognise that this might be the primary way that young people communicate with each other, for example, through Snapchat or WhatsApp.
- There may be social pressures to engage in sexualised behaviours online within relationships which could be problematic or illegal online, but if they were engaged in offline this would be considered normative and fine. For example, sending nude images might be considered by young people to be normal, but being in possession of or sending any nude pictures of anyone under the age of 18 is illegal. Talk about these issues with young people and make sure they are aware of the law and the consequences.



Online behaviour

To prevent negative behaviours online, it is important to teach your child how to be kind online in all sorts of scenarios.

Key messages for your child could include:

- don't join in just to fit in
- what you say online can really hurt someone, or make the person feel good
- watch out for your friends, and stand up for them online just like you would offline
- don't reply to a message from someone if you don't want to
- you deserve to feel safe online. Talk to someone you trust if you are worried about something done or said online, or it just seems weird
- it is your right to take a break from online communications – it'll all be there still when you choose to tune back in



Online behaviour

Discuss the following topics with your child:

- why are people unkind online – is it because they don't see the reaction?
- how can we create a kinder community?
- what do you think is appropriate behaviour online?



Be curious about your child's world

Be curious about who is in your child's online world in the same way you are curious about who they spend time with offline.

- Ask your child about who they are chatting to
- Who do they feel good after talking to?
- Who leaves them feeling down?
- How do they decide who to talk to and what would they do if they don't want to talk to someone?
- Are they having any problems with friends online that they'd like some advice on?



Help them make good choices

Help your child know they have a choice about who they talk to, and they can change their mind. If things get weird or speaking someone doesn't make them feel good, they have a right to distance themselves.

Talk to your child about their options, and help them recognise how they can exercise their choice about who they connect with online. Even when the other person seemed to be really friendly, to begin with.

- Sometimes this is about leaving a specific conversation
- Sometimes this is about reducing how much they talk to that person
- Sometimes this is about “unfollowing” or “unfriending” someone
- Sometimes this is about “blocking” someone
- Or muting a conversation so you don't see what they say



Making a report

[CEOP](#) help and give you advice and you or your child can make a report directly to them if something has happened online which has made them feel unsafe, scared or worried. This might be from someone they know in real life, or someone they have only ever met online. They take all reports seriously and we will do everything they can to keep you safe.



Making a report

Some of the things children and young people have reported to CEOP include:

- someone online has asked me to send them nude images
- I shared a nude image with someone online and they are threatening me
- I did something that I was embarrassed about on webcam and someone has turned nasty towards me
- someone I don't know is asking me to live-stream and do things I don't want to do
- someone online kept asking me to meet them face-to-face and I feel pressured by them
- someone online was talking to me about sex and it made me feel uncomfortable
- someone online is putting pressure on me to do things I don't want to do
- someone I met in an online game keeps trying to talk to me privately



Learn to read the signs

Think about looking at resources that help you understand what is considered appropriate and normal behaviour for the age and stage of development of your child, and which behaviours might be considered more concerning.

Learn to recognise the signs of harmful sexual behaviour, for example, these could include:

- seeking the company of younger children or spending an unusual amount of time with them
- taking younger children to a 'secret place' or playing 'special games'
- insisting on hugging or kissing a child who does not want to be kissed or hugged
- showing anxiety or reluctance to be with a specific child or children
- frequently using aggressive sexual language about others
- showing sexual material to younger children
- making sexually abusive telephone calls
- sending or sharing sexual images
- sharing alcohol or drugs with other children
- viewing indecent images of children, or increasing the amount of pornography they are watching
- exposing their genitals to others
- forcing sex on others.



Not all sexual behaviour involving young people is problematic

This can be a concerning and confusing topic, but not all sexual behaviour involving young people is problematic and they have a right and a choice in how to sexually express themselves.

Behaviour is likely to be normative if it is:

- between young people of a similar age and developmental stage
- voluntary
- mutual
- limited in type and frequency
- balanced by a curiosity about other things
- light-hearted and spontaneous.



Not all sexual behaviour involving young people is problematic

It is worth considering who the behaviour is problematic for, as some behaviours are normal but can make a parent or carer feel uncomfortable or embarrassed because it is sexual in nature. If this is the case, consider the need for your child to learn about sex in a healthy way, as well as how to express themselves sexually in a safe way.

If the behaviour is normal for the child's age and stage of sexual development, this might still provide an opportunity to talk to your child, to teach them and to explain what is appropriate.

If the behaviour becomes more worrying, this might be an opportunity to explain in more detail what is wrong with this behaviour. You should monitor the behaviour to see if it persists and you might want to provide your child with extra support.

If the behaviour is very worrying and more serious, then you need to make sure that you are very clear about what the behaviour is and why it is wrong, ask your child to stop engaging in this behaviour and perhaps seek some advice, for example from the Stop It Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900 or [use our live chat](#), or from a childcare professional such as a health visitor, a GP or a social worker.



What does the law say

With penetrative sexual activity, the young person must be able to understand and give informed consent – children under the age of 13 years old are not capable of giving consent to sexual activity in UK law.

Professionals may want to consider whether a child's sexual activity raises any specific safeguarding issues.

How to tell if a child's sexual behaviour is age appropriate

We can help you understand whether a child's sexual behaviour is age appropriate, whether you're a parent, carer or professional.

By understanding what is healthy and expected behaviour, you will be better able to identify and address behaviour that could be harmful.

Children pass through different stages of development as they grow. Each child is an individual and will develop in their own way. But there is a generally accepted range of behaviours linked to a child's age and developmental stage.

To download our traffic light tool leaflets, to order printed copies, or to find Welsh versions, [visit our Parents Protect website](#).

If you're a professional working with children, please visit [Brook](#) for materials that are designed for and by professionals.



Use the traffic light tool

We have used a traffic light framework to help you in identifying if a child's sexual behaviour is green, amber or red.

Green

These are natural and expected behaviours. This doesn't mean that you would want these behaviours to continue, but they do provide an opportunity to talk, teach, and explain what's appropriate.

Amber

These can be of concern and have the potential to be outside safe and healthy behaviours if they persist. They require a response from a protective adult, extra support and close monitoring.

Red

These are outside healthy and safe behaviours. These behaviours can signal a need for immediate protection and support from a childcare professional, for example, health visitor, GP or social worker.



Sexual behaviour in children under 5 and children aged 5-11

Below we have provided some examples of scenarios that fall under the green, amber and red categories of behaviour, along with suggestions of how to respond to these behaviours. These have been provided as a guide, and it is important to remember that even if a behaviour falls under the green category, this doesn't mean that the behaviour should be encouraged.

Each behaviour offers an opportunity to talk with children about keeping themselves and others safe, and to let them know that you are someone who will listen.

Remember that it is important to respond calmly.



Sexual behaviours in children under 5

Green category behaviour in children under 5

- Attempting to touch or curiosity about other children's genitals
- Attempting to touch or curiosity about breasts, bottoms or genitals of adults
- Role play games e.g. mummies and daddies, doctors and nurses
- Interest in body parts and what they do
- Touches/ rubs own genitals when nappy is being changed, when going to sleep, when tense, excited or afraid
- Explores differences between males and females, boys and girls
- Asks about the genitals, breasts, babies
- Has erections
- Likes to be naked
- Interested in watching people doing bathroom functions
- Interested in having / bathing a baby
- Puts something in the genitals or rectum for curiosity or exploration



Sexual behaviour in children under 5

Amber category behaviour in children under 5

- Continues to touch/rub genitals in public after being told many times not to do so
- Continuous questions about genital differences after all questions have been answered
- Touches the genitals, breasts of adults not in the family and asks to be touched
- Interest in watching bathroom functions does not wane
- Puts something in genitals or rectum of self or other frequently or after being told 'no'
- Rubbing up against other children with clothes off or on
- Pulling other children's pants down / skirts up / trousers down against their will



Sexual behaviour in children under 5

Red category behaviour in children under 5

- Touches/rubs self in public or in private to the exclusion of normal childhood activities
- Plays male or female roles in an angry, sad or aggressive manner
- Expresses fear and/or disgust of own or opposite gender
- Sneakily touches adults' private parts
- Uses coercion or force in role play games with other children
- Persists in putting something in own or another child's genitals or rectum, even if painful
- Simulated or real intercourse without clothes or engages in oral sex
- Doing any of the above in secret



Sexual behaviour in children aged 5-11

Children in this age group continue to seek information and understanding about themselves and the world around them through play. They are often interested in pregnancy, birth, gender and differences between gender, which can form part of healthy and developmentally expected sexual exploration.

As children grow through their early years and develop into later childhood, they continue to pass through different stages of development. We know that children remain individual and unique throughout their whole childhood and there is a wide range of generally accepted and expected behaviours within this age group.



Green behaviour in children aged 5-11

- Increased sense of privacy about their body
- Body touching and holding own genitals
- Masturbation, usually with awareness of privacy
- Curiosity about other children's genitals involving looking at and/ or touching the bodies of familiar children
- Curiosity about sexuality e.g. questions about babies, gender, relationships, sexual activity
- Telling stories or asking questions using swear words, 'toilet' words or names for private parts
- Use of mobile phones and Internet in relationships with known peers



Amber behaviour in children aged 5-11

- Self masturbation in preference to other activities, whether in private or in public or with peers, and/or causing self injury
- Explicit talk, art or play of sexual nature
- Persistent questions about sexuality despite being answered
- Persistent nudity and/or exposing private parts in presence of others
- Persistently watching or following others to look at or touch them
- Pulling other children's pants down or skirts up against their will
- Persistently mimicking sexual flirting behaviour too advanced for age, with other children or adults
- Touching genitals/private parts of animals
- Covert/secret use of mobile phone and Internet with known and unknown people which may include giving out identifying details
- Attempts to do any of the above in secret



Red behaviour in children aged 5-11

- Compulsive masturbation to the point of self harm or seeking an audience
- Disclosure of sexual abuse
- Persistent bullying involving sexual aggression
- Simulation of, or participation in, sexual activities, including sexual behaviour with younger or less able children, e.g. oral sex, sexual intercourse
- Accessing the rooms of sleeping children to touch or engage in sexual activity
- Presence of a sexually transmitted infection
- Any sexual activity with animals
- Use of mobile phones and Internet for sending or receiving sexual images



How to talk about worrying behaviours

When you talk to your child about any worrying behaviours, the following can help:

- making sure you stay calm
- making sure you have plenty of time
- speaking to your child somewhere private, where you are alone and away from other family members
- asking your child whether anything is troubling them and listening to what they say
- providing reassurance that you are there for them, that they can talk to you and that you are not judging them
- explaining why you feel their behaviour is worrying you, and what the consequences of their behaviour can be
- deciding together what you are going to do to make some changes, and making sure your response is proportionate to what has happened. Refer to resources such as the [family safety plan from Parents Protect](#)
- redirecting your child to safe activities
- monitoring and supporting your child
- re-visiting things if the problematic behaviours persist or get worse.



Why do some children act in a harmful way?

Usually, but not always, the child or young person causing the harm is older than the victim. Often victims are uncomfortable or confused about what is happening and may feel they are willingly involved, but they do not understand the behaviour is harmful.

Similarly, children and young people who behave in a harmful sexual manner may be uncomfortable or confused about their behaviour and will rarely understand why they are behaving in such a way.

Some children have a history of abuse or feeling insecure which contributes to their need to behave in a sexually harmful manner.

Whatever the cause of a child or young person's sexually harmful behaviour, it is important to stop it before it goes any further.



Signs a child might be abusing

A child or young person who is sexually harming another might display certain signs.

Do you know a child or adolescent who:

- Seeks out the company of younger children and spends an unusual amount of time in their company?
- Takes younger children to 'secret' places or hideaways or plays 'special' games with them (e.g. doctor and patient, removing clothing etc.) especially games unusual for their age?
- Insists on hugging or kissing a child when the child does not want to?
- Tells you they do not want to be alone with a child or becomes anxious when a particular child or young person is coming to visit?
- Frequently uses aggressive sexual language about adults or children?
- Shows sexual material to younger children?
- Makes sexually abusive telephone calls?



Signs a child might be abusing

- Shares alcohol or other drugs with younger children or teens?
- Views sexual images of children on the internet or elsewhere?
- Exposes their genitals to younger children?
- Forces sex on another adolescent or child?
- Becomes secretive about their online activity, shutting the door of the room where they are using the computer and changing the screen if someone enters the room
- Hides traces of their online activity and storage files
- Uses the new technology with children whilst excluding adults
- Meets up with children, young people and/or vulnerable adults in real life who they have initially met online.



First reactions

For most parents and carers, discovering that their child is being investigated after engaging in illegal sexual behaviour online is shocking and distressing. Many will fear for their child's welfare and be confused about what to do.

It is likely you will have some urgent questions about how you can help your child and what might happen next. It is very important to seek appropriate help for you and the young person you look after. Knowing who you can talk to is the first step to getting the right help and support.



You can talk to someone

The [Stop It Now! helpline](#) is run by [The Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#), a leading charity working to prevent the sexual abuse of children. The helpline is staffed by trained advisors, who will listen and offer confidential and impartial advice.

They offer support and help to the parents of children and young people who've got into trouble online. When you call, you don't have to give your name or identifying details if you don't want to.

Calling the helpline is an important first step towards working out what to do next, to help your child and others around you.

You might feel there is no one you can talk to... but you can pick up the phone and call us on 0808 1000 900, send us an [anonymous message](#) or use our [live chat service](#).

You can also [download a pdf](#) of the information on this page.

<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>

