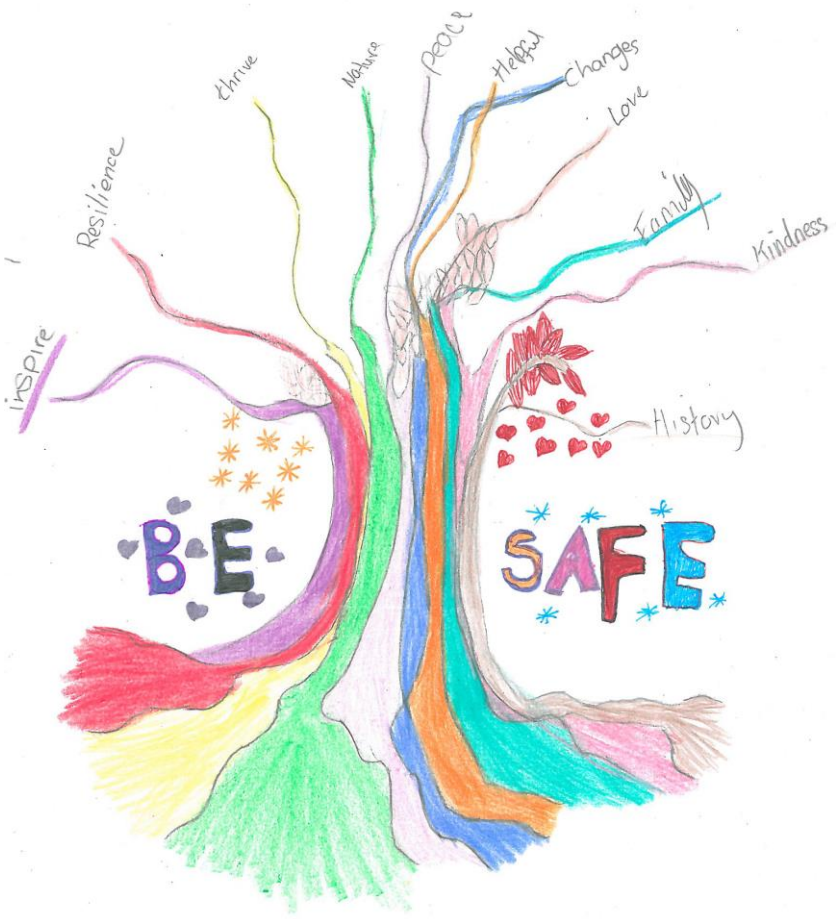
RESPONDING TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

JANUARY 2025



Reviewed – October 2025

BACKGROUND

This document has been created to aid schools in responding to problematic and harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people. We have aimed to provide clear, evidence based guidelines, to build schools confidence in dealing with this behaviour.

It is emphasised that schools should be part of any programme of work that is undertaken in order to understand and manage problematic and harmful sexual behaviours. That said, it is imperative that where there are children or young people displaying these behaviours, the school follows their local safeguarding procedures and organisational policies when responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour, and/or any other safeguarding concern.

This is a summary document and is intended to be read as a supplement to national statutory guidance:

- Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK
- Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023

It has also been created to reflect local safeguarding policies and procedures, including:

- Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership: guidance for professionals on harmful sexual behaviour
- Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership: Education Model Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy
- Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership: Child Sexual Abuse Pathway

This document was produced in partnership with Bristol Safeguarding in Education Team, Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust Be Safe Service and Brook.

Contents

1. WHAT DOES APPROPRIATE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR LOOK LIKE?

Natural and healthy development will involve some behaviour related to sex and sexuality. Sexual exploration and some types of sexual play are a natural part of growing up (Gil and Cavanagh-Johnson, 1993; Ryan and Lane, 1997). Children and young people of all ages use these behaviours in order to learn and make sense of their sensory environments.

Appropriate sexual play:

- Is voluntary
- Involves children who are of a similar age and size
- Is consensual; children and young people can disengage in the behaviour
- Involves children with the same cognitive ability
- Involves friends rather than siblings
- Is light hearted and spontaneous
- Involves curiosity
- Does not intentionally cause discomfort or pain

2. WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR?

The table below provides descriptions of age appropriate sexual behaviours. Knowing 'what is developmentally expected' aids the identification of behaviours which may be considered to problematic or harmful. This is intended as a broad guide only. In addition, it is important that the child's general development along with the presence of any learning disability or neurodevelopmental condition be considered in relation to age appropriate sexual behaviours.

Please also be aware of the presence and effects of cultural norms, values and expectations and religious beliefs concerning sexuality when thinking about what is within the normal range. However, also be aware that some sexualised behaviour may be minimised as culturally acceptable. Seek advice and consultation with cultural "experts" if necessary.

Age	Behaviours within the developmentally expected range
0 – 4 Years Old	• This is a time for curiosity and sensory development. • Infants have a sensual and gratified response to closeness – it generates feelings of trust, security and an ability to regulate stress. • Good touches such as hugs, kisses, patting, tickling are part of relationships, showing affection and reassurance. • Children are disinhibited – they may take their clothes off, poke themselves, touch their genitals and generally explore themselves and how their body works. • They may look at, ask questions and generally show curiosity, about other people's private body parts. • They may show others their own private parts. • Children may sporadically self soothe (masturbate) to calm and reduce tension and for pleasure, sometimes when others are present.

Age	Behaviours within the developmentally expected range
5 – 7 Years Old	• This is a stage where children become aware of difference between, and start to separate okay and not okay behaviours. They may become inhibited, seeking privacy for example with the toilet and keeping clothes on. They become more aware of the presence of socially appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. • Curiosity is developing with questions like "Where did I come from?" • They find toilet language funny and will use it amongst themselves and with adults. • They may be exploring masturbation and pleasurable sensations.

Age	Behaviours within the developmentally expected range
8 – 12 Years Old	• This is a complex stage of development where a lot is taking place and where young people often begin to enter puberty. • Changes in the body start to take place, which can cause anxiety, curiosity and further exploration. • Children's understanding and cognition is increasing. They are continuing to develop a sense of curiosity and are more aware of the differences between their own bodies and the bodies of those around them e.g. gender differences. • The impact of messages within the media carries more meaning. They want to look nice, be fashionable and 'cool'. An awareness of difference develops, whether you fit into a group or not is more pronounced. • Societal norms and rules around sex talk, privacy and relationships are understood more on a literal level – full understanding of specific words may not yet be in place.
Age	**Behaviours within the developmentally expected range**
13 – 15 Years Old	• There is a move into puberty, if it has already not begun, with all associated bodily and hormonal changes. There may be greater bodily awareness with associated anxiety for some. • Young people may show petting behaviours and for some more advanced behaviours. • There may be increasing challenges around identity, sexuality, belonging, peers and processes of differentiation.
Age	**Behaviours within the developmentally expected range**
16-18 Years Old	• Young people may now have greater sexual knowledge and language and be moving into "the adult phase". Some may have engaged in a range of adult sexual behaviours. • For some there may be longer lasting relationships and an increasing need for intimacy and emotional closeness, along with sexual desire and pleasure.

Adapted from Cavanagh Johnson (2010), Friedrich et al, (1998), Hagen et al, (2008)

3. WHAT ARE THE FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR?

A consistent finding (Be Safe service annual report data https://www.awp.nhs.uk/camhs/camhs-services/HSB-services/be-safe) is that children and young people who display problematic/harmful sexual behaviour have been exposed to a variety of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and we may need to consider this in our responses to young people showing HSB. Such factors may include:

- Neglect
- Emotional trauma
- Being subject to sexual assault or a physical assault
- Exposure to domestic violence/abuse within the home
- Growing up in an environment where there are poor sexual boundaries and inadequate rules about modesty and privacy. The assessment of what constitutes inappropriate rules/boundaries is complex and both cultural and family beliefs are relevant.
- Exposure to adult sexual behaviour and adults acting in sexual ways within the home, which may be paired with aggression
- Exposure to sexualised stimuli from films, TV, the internet, social media, literature and games
- Poor opportunity for secure attachment or a discontinuity of care. For example, the young person may have experienced multiple chaotic environments
- Rejection by family or by peers
- Unpredictability
- Parental substance misuse
- Other trauma experiences

For further information about developmentally appropriate sexual behaviours, please refer to the NSPCC for more information. Please see section 4 and 5 below for information on Harmful Sexual Behaviour and identifying Harmful Sexual Behaviour in children and young people.

4. WHAT IS HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR?

The NSPCC defines HSB as developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people, which is harmful to others. It often takes place along with other individuals who they have power over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, or intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a betrayal of trust. These activities can range from using sexually explicit words and phrases to full penetrative sex with other children or adults. (NSPCC, NICE adapted by Calder 2002 and Barnardos, 2016).

Professionals should be concerned if any of the following criteria are met:

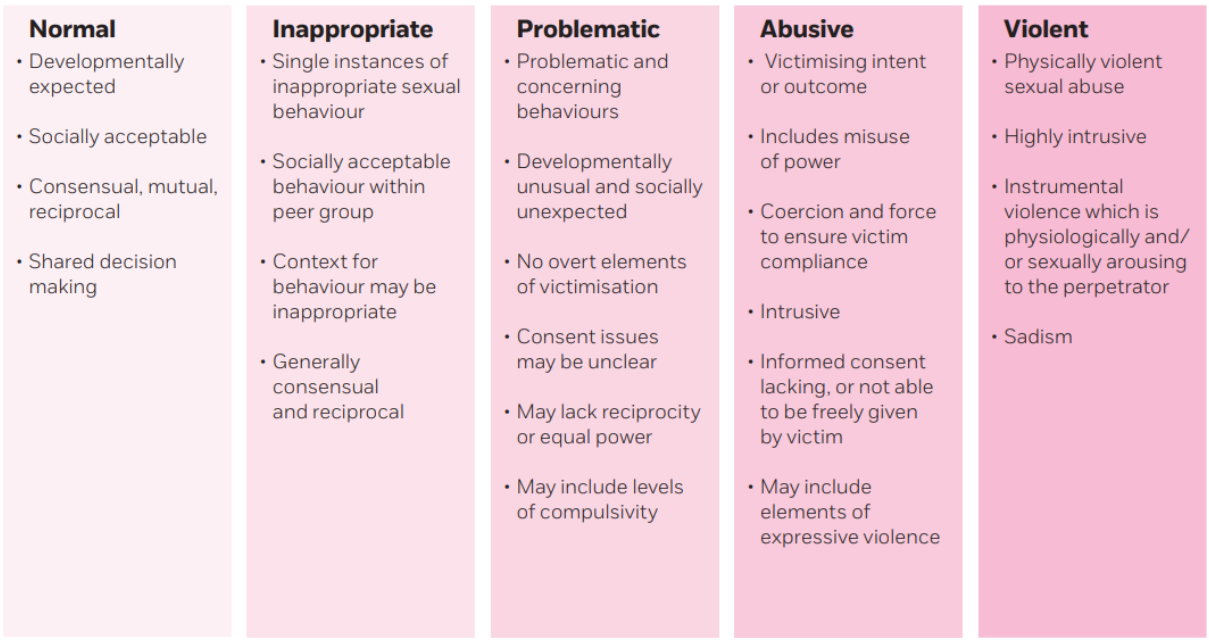
- The behaviour indicates sexual knowledge that is unusual for a child of this age and stage of development.
- The behaviour sits outside developmental norms for the child's age.
- The behaviour is between children of different ages or developmental abilities, or with other power differences between them.
- The behaviour occurs at a frequency greater than would be developmentally expected.
- The behaviour interferes with the child's development.
- The behaviour occurs with coercion, intimidation or force.
- The behaviour is associated with emotional distress (when the child is feeling anxious, for example).
- Themes of dominance in sexualised play
- A child/young person who does not respond to attempts to correct inappropriate sexual behaviour.
- A child/young person who shows a lack of boundaries (behaviour occurs in an inappropriate place or at an inappropriate time).
- Behaviours that interfere with the child/ young person's relationships and other tasks.
- Behaviours that make other people uncomfortable and/or lead to complaints from adults or children.
- Those around the child or young person may seem agitated, anxious or fearful
- A process of 'grooming' with the aim of sexually harming another individual, whereby the victim is coerced. This may involve praising, gifts, and isolating the child/young person.

Technology Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour includes:

- Someone under the age of 18 creating and sharing sexual imagery of themselves with a peer under the age of 18
- Sextortion – forcing somebody to do something by threatening to publish sexual material about them
- Non-consensual sharing of self-produced sexual images
- Cyber flashing – unsolicited sexual image via social media or dating app
- Accessing adult porn sites or adult content
- Exposing another child or young person to adult online pornography
- Viewing sexual images of children and young people under 18
- Inciting or coercing sexual activity. This can include online grooming and sexual exploitation of peers and younger children (and potentially adults in some circumstances)

5. How do I identify Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Children and Young People?

Hackett's continuum of harmful sexual behaviour illustrates the range of sexual behaviours children may present. The continuum can be used as a screening tool to help identify harmful sexual behaviour. You can also read the age-specific guidance below. (Hackett, 2010)



There is more information in this tool How to tell if a child's sexual behaviour is appropriate for their age - Lucy Faithfull Foundation which has guidance around appropriate sexual behaviours for under 5's and 5-11 year old. For 11+ years there is guidance in the link. These guides can act as a starting point for discussions around sexualised behaviours in children and young people.

Learning disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Please also be aware of the impact of neurodiversity and learning disabilities when thinking about harmful sexual behaviour. Children with learning disabilities may have less understanding about what is and what is not acceptable sexual behaviour and might relate more easily to children younger than themselves. Additionally, although individuals with autism spectrum disorders are not at increased risk of displaying harmful sexual behaviours, they may have social skills difficulties, challenges within their sensory environment and difficulties understanding how others think and feel. This may influence their engagement in sexualised behaviours and understanding of these behaviours.

It is important to note that children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are also three times more likely to be sexually harmed than their peers.

Resources adapted by the NSPCC for young people with learning difficulties can be found here.

The National Autistic Society provides information and support including information on the unique difficulties of a young person with autism in relation to sex and sexuality and social stories resources.

More information around learning disability and harmful sexual behaviour can be found in the links below including information about the development of the Keep Safe programme.

Safer-IDD - Research at Kent

https://research.kent.ac.uk/safer-idd/

Keep Safe - Safer-IDD - Research at Kent

https://research.kent.ac.uk/safer-idd/keep-safe/

Keep Safe background and development YouTube video presentation.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao0MLIQX9Yo

Considering cultural contexts and religious beliefs

The presence and effects of cultural scripts, values, expectations and religious beliefs concerning sexuality need to be considered. Religion can influence a family's attitudes, beliefs and views of sexual behaviour. When seeking to understand the reasons for problematic sexualised behaviour it is important to consider the individual and family's religious and cultural context.

Some problematic sexualised behaviour may be minimised and considered acceptable within certain cultures and communities. For example, a family may come from a country where the age of consent is lower than it is in the UK.

It is important to consider the impact of stigma and shame on individual's and family's ability and confidence to speak openly about issues of a sexual nature, particularly those that are problematic. Shame and stigma within family and communities can lead to avoidance, secret keeping, blame, minimisation and denial. It can be helpful to understand the function of avoidance and denial when supporting families and individuals.

Acknowledging our own values and possible unconscious bias can facilitate more positive and productive conversations about harmful sexual behaviour with families from different backgrounds. It is important to consider these differences in our approaches and in how we work with families. Be person-centred, open and respectful in your approach and seek advice and consultation with cultural "experts" if necessary. Schools should provide an environment that allows safe exploration of diversity.

6. What role can schools play in the management of problematic and Harmful Sexual Behaviour?

A) Statutory response

When an incident involves an act of sexual violence (rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault, causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent) the starting point is that this should be reported to police immediately **regardless** of the age of criminal responsibility (10 years old in the UK). This must be reported directly to the police via 101, unless in an emergency when this will be reported via 999.

A concurrent referral to children social care must also be made. A strategy discussion can be requested where education can voice explicitly concerns of criminalisation in a multi-agency context.

You can access KBSP HSB Protocol and aide memoir for strategy discussions here:

https://bristolsafeguarding.org/professional-resources/child-sexual-abuse

Bristol First Response: 0117 903 6444

You can access South Gloucestershire Safeguarding HSB guidance for professionals here:

https://sites.southglos.gov.uk/safeguarding/children/i-am-a-professional/safeguarding-guidance-policies-and-plans/

South Gloucestershire Access and Response Team: 01454 866000

Schools should follow the advice and guidance given by the police following an incident being reported. Schools should contact the Officer in Charge of the investigation to get regular updates about the progress of the investigation. If unable to get hold of the investigating officer the Direct Operation Ruby phone number is 01278 647546. In addition, referrals should still be made through correct channels via safeguarding leads through to the police lighthouse safeguarding unit

B) Immediate Protective Measures

Ensure the immediate safety of all children involved; it is important to remember that where harmful sexual behaviour is being displayed, all children involved need to be safeguarded and supported. This includes any children who have experienced and/or witnessed abuse or harm, as well as any children who have harmed other children.

Our responses should be proportionate, child-centred and based on the individual needs of the children involved. Children who have experienced sexual harm, wherever it happens, may find the experience stressful and distressing. This will, in all likelihood, adversely affect their educational attainment and will be exacerbated if the child who has harmed attends the same school or college.

Ensure that local safeguarding guidelines are followed for both the young person who has been harmed and young person who has harmed. Both may be 'children in need'. The needs of the child who has been harmed should be considered separately to the needs of the child/young person who has harmed (Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance, 2023).

Remember, interventions are undertaken in order to support individuals to make safe, positive and more appropriate choices in the future. They are not undertaken in order to punish a child or young person.

Records should be kept in line with the schools policies and procedures.

C) Multi-agency response

The management of children and young people with problematic and harmful sexual behaviour is complex and should not be taken on by a single agency. It is important that schools work with other appropriate agencies around the child or young person to ensure the safety of all involved. Always consult with your safeguarding lead and follow your schools safeguarding policy.

Children's Social care (Bristol)
For initial advice and information from children social care, please contact the Family Help Team:
Telephone North: 0117 352 1499 / email familyhelpnorth@bristol.gov.uk
Telephone South: 0117 903 7770 / email familyhelpsouth@bristol.gov.uk
Telephone East/Central: 0117 357 6460 / email familyhelpeastcentral@bristol.gov.uk

To report a concern through First Response: Click here

Brook

Brook is a health and wellbeing charity for young people who can provide local **educational intervention** that seeks to fill a knowledge or understanding gap, or to shift unexamined attitudes.
Brook's 'My Life One-to-One' programme is available for young people aged 13-19 who need additional support in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. The work requested must be for education purposes only as this is not a counselling service. It is important the young person consents to a referral being made and the young person can choose whether to participate or not.

Further information and Brook Referral form: **BNSSG 1-1 Referral Form**

Be Safe

For specialist advice following an incident or identification of harmful sexual behaviour, you can contact the local specialist service Be Safe. Be Safe can offer consultation and guidance on responding to incidents via their enquiry service. Where the problematic or harmful behaviour is persistent and seems unlikely to respond to an educational intervention, a **therapeutic intervention** may be considered. If you would like to contact Be Safe to discuss a potential referral:

Email: awp.besafe@nhs.net
Telephone: 0117 340 8700

On Track delivered by DGF Psychology (South Gloucestershire)

For children and young people in South Gloucestershire from the age of 12 up to the age of 18 you can contact DGF Psychology. DGF Psychology offer consultation, guidance, assessment and therapeutic intervention for harmful sexual behaviour. If you would like to contact DGF Psychology to discuss a potential referral:

Email: ontrack@dgfpsychology.co.uk
Telephone: 01633 250242

D) Safety and support planning

Following the immediate response, it will be helpful to consider what measures are in place to keep all children involved in any incident safe. This needs to be done in a non-punitive way that will continue to support all children in having access to education. Safety planning also needs to be proportionate and in agreement with parents/carers, young people involved (if appropriate), and other agencies involved in the care of the young person.

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse has created education resources that are helpful when responding to concerns around sexual abuse or behaviours:

- Safety planning in education: a guide for professionals supporting children following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour
- Communicating with children: a guide for education professionals when there are concerns about sexual abuse or behaviour

E) Talking to parents and carers

Parents need to be involved in conversations providing this is safe to do so. It can be shocking to hear your child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour and it is important therefore to stay calm and give clear information. As with other difficult conversations, it is important to be empathetic and non-judgemental when providing a supportive response to parents. The Centre for expertise on child sexual abuse has created a resource specifically for educational professionals that outlines how to communicate with parents and carers when there are concerns about harmful sexual behaviour, which can be found here.

Parents Protect also have a number of resources for parents regarding online safety and making safety plans at home.

F) School Culture

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (including sexual violence and sexual harassment) can occur between two or more children (including groups) of any age and sex, from primary through to secondary stage and into college. Sexual violence and sexual harassment exist on a continuum and may overlap; they can occur online and face-to-face (both physically and verbally) and are never acceptable.

Keeping children safe in education 2025 states that schools and colleges should be aware of the importance of:

• Making clear that there is a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence and sexual harassment, that it is never acceptable, and it will not be tolerated. It should never be passed off as “banter”, “just having a laugh”, “a part of growing up” or “boys being boys”. Failure to do so can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviour, an unsafe environment and in worst-case scenarios a culture that normalises abuse, leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it

• recognising, acknowledging, and understanding the scale of harassment and abuse and that even if there are no reports it does not mean it is not happening, it may be the case that it is just not being reported

• challenging physical behaviour (potentially criminal in nature) such as grabbing bottoms, breasts and genitalia, pulling down trousers, flicking bras and lifting up skirts. Dismissing or tolerating such behaviours risks normalising them.

Whilst any report of sexual violence or sexual harassment should be taken seriously, staff should be aware it is more likely that girls will be the victims of sexual violence and sexual harassment and more likely, it will be perpetrated by boys.

Ultimately, it is essential that all victims are reassured that they are being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe.

This needs to be balanced with an understanding that some children and young people that display harmful sexual behaviours may have their own histories of trauma, abuse, neglect and other contextual difficulties which makes harmful sexual behaviour more likely. When responding to harmful sexual behaviour in the school environment, this needs to be taken into consideration in order to provide a proportionate and appropriate response.

G) Looking After Yourself

Hearing about harmful sexual behaviour and managing the impacts of harmful sexual behaviour can be difficult. For all professionals working with harmful sexual behaviour as well as mental health issues and abuse, there is a high risk of vicarious trauma. Therefore, creating good self-care and boundaries is essential for looking after yourself.

We recommend that all professionals utilise their supervision or management meetings to debrief about anything that they have found difficult or upsetting.

Consider what support your organisation has in terms of employer assistance schemes or access to psychological support.

The Upstream Project provides further information for professionals working with this topic.

In addition, you can also get help and support from the mental health charity Mind.

If you have personal experience of sexual harm, you can find support and advice in your area using the Survivors Trust map of services.

APPENDIX A – FLOW CHART

Please note: All schools should have clear procedures for responding to all forms of Child on Child Abuse outlined in safeguarding and behaviour policies.

Responding to harmful sexual behaviour, sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and colleges

School made aware of incident(s). May include an incident on or off school site /hours

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Immediate safety and wellbeing of all children involved should be ascertained and any immediate support put in place

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Staff follow internal child protection and safeguarding procedure to report and record the incident. Designated Safeguarding Lead coordinates response by appropriately trained and placed staff. Head/Principle to be made aware.

To determine the nature of the incident(s) and what action should be taken:
-Consider what has been communicated from school community, including staff, children and families.
-Consider timing and knowledge of incident (including information referred to on social media).

Designated Safeguarding Leads and key safeguarding staff should refer to guidance and tools below:

- Brook's Sexual Behaviour Traffic Light Tool – training is required to access and use the tool
- Part 5 of Keeping Children Safe in Education – Child on child sexual violence and harassment
- Guidance – sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges
- Be Safe Guidance for schools

Outcomes and responses

Statutory Response

Any report of rape, assault by penetration or sexual assault should be reported to the police via 101. Seek advice from the police with regards to informing parents of those involved. A concurrent referral to social care also needs to be made.

Where a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm a referral should be made to children's social care.

Schools to request invite to potential strategy discussion.

Early Help/Targeted response

Where an immediate statutory response is not needed, you can seek advice from Families on Focus Teams in the first instance.
Other Considerations:

- Use of Families in Focus Team Around the School (TAS) offer
- Team Around the Child/Family meeting
- Creative Youth Network (CYN)
- Referral to Brook
- Be Safe
- Safety Planning

Internal/universal response

In some cases of sexual harassment, for example, one-off incidents the school may manage internally through using their own policies and providing pastoral support.
Considerations:

- CYN – Healthy Relationships work
- Pastoral interventions
- Contextual Safeguarding Network self-assessment tools
- School community engagement – staff updates, assemblies, workshops
- Review of RSHE provision
- Review policies and internal support

← All reasonable adjustments should be considered and actioned to keep all children safe and provide right to education →

APPENDIX B – FURTHER RESOURCES

Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership

The Safeguarding in Education Team support schools and education settings around policies, procedures, and practice in promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in Bristol. Please contact for further information: safeguardingineducationteam@bristol.gov.uk. Local Bristol protocol and advice can be found here.

Bristol Healthy Schools

Bristol Healthy Schools provides support for all Bristol schools and education settings to improve the health and wellbeing of pupils, staff and families. https://www.bristol.gov.uk/bristol-healthy-schools

Lucy Faithfull Foundation – Stop it Now

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a child protection charity, working to prevent child sexual abuse by making sure adults know what they can do to keep children safe. They offer anonymous and confidential online advice, self-help resources and training opportunities for both professionals and parents.

SARSAS: Sibling Sexual Abuse Project

The SARSAS Sibling Sexual Abuse Project is the largest Government-funded project on sibling sexual abuse to date and provides a number of resources for families and individuals affected by sibling sexual abuse.

Talk Relationships – for PSHE (NSPCC)

To support teachers in delivering sex and relationships education, the NSPCC have launched a UK-wide service called Talk Relationships.

This includes an online e-learning course, 14 lesson plans developed in partnership with the PSHE Association, lesson plans focusing on a wide range of topics that are included in the curriculum such as sexual harassment, healthy relationships and sharing sexual images and a dedicated helpline, where our experts will offer help and advice to any teacher with a question or safeguarding concern.

Resources from the Talk Relationships service can be found here.

The Green House

The Green House is a specialist support service for children, young people and families who have experienced sexual abuse. The Green House provide creative evidence-based support services led by the voices of young people and their families including 1:1 and group therapeutic support. You can use the following details to contact the Green House for support:

Call: 0117 935 1707

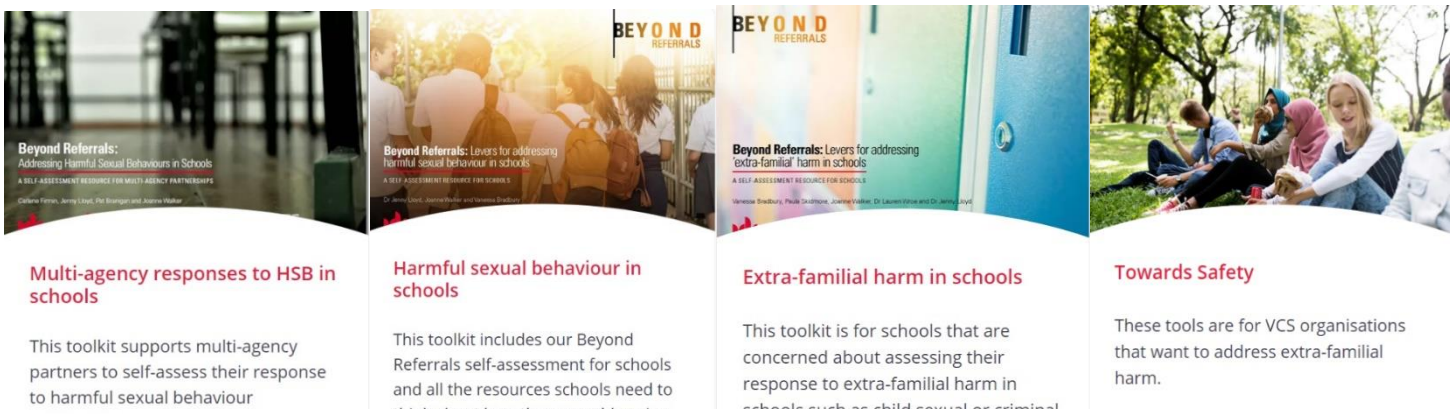
Text: +44737 890 51 83

E-mail: info@the-green-house.org.uk

Schools, Sexual Abuse and Support guidance from The Green House can be found here

The Contextual safeguarding network

The Contextual Safeguarding Network project Beyond Referrals has created toolkits to support education in assessing and responding to harmful sexual behaviour as a context of harm:



CEOPeducation

Helpful information around how a young person can get support if they have sent explicit content of themselves to someone can be found on the CEOP website

Brook Traffic Light Tool

A guide to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours in children and young people. Training is required to access the tool.

More information can be found here Brook Traffic Light Tool

Shore

A safe space for teenagers worried about sexual behaviour Shorespace

A digital safety plan - Digital safety plan

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