

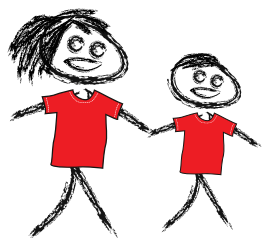
# Fact Sheet

## RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING TO Harmful sexual behaviours



**Harmful sexual behaviours...is an umbrella term used to describe a range of sexualised behaviours that are either problematic or abusive in nature.**

*"Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive to another child, young person or adult" (Hackett, Holmes and Brannigan, 2016).*



As a parent or carer, it is important to distinguish between typical developmentally appropriate sexual behaviours and problematic or abusive ones. It is essential to factor in the context and circumstances of the behaviour and respond appropriately. Curious body exploration, play and experimentation are normal behaviours for children. This can support healthy learning about their own bodies, sexuality and relationships with others in a harmless, developmentally appropriate way.

### Typical sexual behaviours in children can involve:

- Exploring bodies, gender roles and behaviours.
- Engaging with children of **similar** ages, developmental stage, and physical size, such as siblings and friends. They are **voluntary**.
- Following developmental and age appropriate guidelines.
- **Observe rules** regarding personal space and boundaries.
- Involve behaviours limited in type, frequency, intensity and are **not intrusive**.
- Being **generally curious** in nature, including of the body and sex.
- Expressing sexuality in a **child-like way**.
- **Responding** to gentle redirection and typical parenting strategies.
- Experiencing feelings of embarrassment or guilt.

**Typical sexual behaviour is curious, light-hearted, spontaneous.**

### Harmful sexual behaviours (problematic or abusive) in children can involve:

- Engaging other children **dissimilar** in age, developmental stage or physical size, such as siblings and children who are not friends and might involve adults and animals.
- Displaying inappropriate behaviours for their developmental stage and/or age.
- Using coercion, force, bribery, manipulation, threats. It can be **involuntary** eliciting complaints or affects other children.
- **Disregarding** rules on personal space or boundaries.
- Displaying behaviours **not limited** to type or frequency. They are intensity driven and intrusive.
- **Focusing on** sexualising nonsexual things. Children may also sexualise and romanticise relationships.
- Expressing sexuality in **adult ways**, with detailed and specific sexual knowledge.
- Using **sexual behaviour** to combat feelings of loneliness or stress, to hurt others or when angry or aggressive.
- Being **unresponsive** to gentle redirection or typical parenting strategies.
- Experiencing **limited feelings** of embarrassment or guilt.

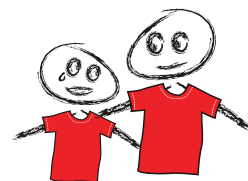
Harmful Sexual Behaviours (problematic or abusive) is **intrusive, abusive, aggressive, excessive**.

## STOP is a useful way to remember how to respond to harmful sexual behaviour

- S** **Stay calm and do not panic.** Plan how to effectively respond to the situation. **Clearly and calmly name the harmful sexual behaviour correctly** and ask the child to stop. In younger children, redirect them to another activity.
- T** **Talk privately to the child about the behaviour.** **Take the time to listen closely to everything they say.** Clearly state the behaviour is the concern, not the child. Explain why the behaviour is harmful. Help the child understand their behaviour, bodies, relationships, boundaries, and consent, in age appropriate ways. Be clear and check the child's understanding.
- O** **Observe the context of the behaviour and consider what might be causing the behaviour.** Write down your observations, how you supported the child and any relevant information the child is experiencing.
- P** **Pass on any relevant information that is of concern.** **Consider where you can get help and support. Who you might need to tell?** Find appropriate resources to share with the child.

### Remember, all children and young people:

- Have the right to be **safe and protected** from harm **at all times**.
- Have the right to **accurate, age appropriate education** and information.
- Need **positive responses** to foster understanding (experiencing guilt, shame, or confusion can shut children down and stop them learning).
- Need **help to learn** about rules, healthy boundaries, and social cues.
- Need to be reassured **that telling a safety helper is the right thing to do when something is wrong**.
- **Need to be heard** - **never ignore the behaviour, minimise or dismiss the incident**.



## Safety planning

The goal of safety planning is to know the risks of the specific behaviour of concern and plan to reduce specific concerns or risks identified in daily activities. It plans for the level of adult supervision or support to help children be successful. It is also important to be clear on the role each agency or stakeholder is required to fulfil, including monitoring and reviewing the plan. Please see *Daniel Morcombe Foundation Safety Planning Guide*.

## Caring for yourself as a parent or carer

A situation like this can be very stressful and confronting. It is important you talk to dependable, non-judgemental, and supportive friends and family. Seeking the support of specialist child and adolescent counsellors can also be extremely helpful in linking you and your family with further support and resources. **Remember** to focus on making time for self-care. Engage in techniques which reenergise you during stressful moments.

## Where to get help

- In an emergency, call the Police or triple zero (000)
- Parentline - 1800 30 1300 provide free telephone counselling and advice to parents and carers. Resources are available at [www.parentline.com.au/](http://www.parentline.com.au/).
- Kids Helpline - 1800 55 1800 provide a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25. Resources and webchat are available at [kidshelpline.com.au/](http://kidshelpline.com.au/).
- [RaisingChildren.net.au](http://RaisingChildren.net.au).
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service 1800 737 732
- Australian Childhood Foundation 1300 381 581
- Lifeline (13 11 14) is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au).

