

Online harmful sexual behaviours in children and young people under 18

For children and young people under 18 years old, conduct that is inappropriate at the age or stage of their sexual development, or that is sexually exploitative or abusive, is considered harmful behaviour.¹ Online harmful sexual behaviour refers to conduct that occurs when using the internet.

The behaviour can be harmful to both the child or young person who displays it and people it's directed towards. When it's directed towards a child or young person of a similar age it's often referred to as 'peer-on-peer' harmful sexual behaviour. This can occur within close relationships, within friendships, or outside both.

Background

The internet and connected devices are playing an increasing role in the lives of most children and young people, including their sexual development. These days, they are commonly exploring their identity, relationships and sexuality through online information, conduct and contact.

When children and young people experience and express their sexuality in a way that is appropriate to their age and developmental maturity it's considered healthy behaviour, whether it happens offline or online. When these behaviours involve their peers, they are consensual and respectful.² For example, sexual online chat may be acceptable between two teenagers who are above the age of legal consent, although it would not be appropriate between two children who have just started primary school.

Unfortunately, children and young people may also engage in harmful sexual behaviours that are developmentally inappropriate, or that exploit or abuse others.

Online sexual behaviours that are inappropriate at an early developmental stage can include:

- viewing pornography
- sending nude photos or videos
- participating in sexual chat or explicitly describing sexual acts
- participating in sexual acts by webcam.

Online sexual behaviours that are exploitative or abusive can include:

- posting sexually harassing comments or content about someone else
- pressuring others to send nudes
- sharing intimate images or videos without the consent of the person shown
- sextortion – a form of blackmail that involves threatening to share someone's intimate image or video online unless they meet certain demands
- coercing or forcing someone to engage in sexual acts

Children and young people may not recognise their behaviours are harmful to themselves or others for a number of reasons:

- Sometimes they don't think their actions are sexual or harmful if they occur online, within a friendship, or with a girlfriend or boyfriend.
- They may not have learnt about respectful sexual conduct and relationships.
- It could start as a mutually agreeable experience but then become inappropriate, exploitative or abusive
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour may have been directed towards them by other children or young people so they think it's normal and acceptable.

¹Hackett, S., Holmes, D., & Branigan, P. (2016). [Harmful sexual behaviour framework: an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours](#).

²True relationships and reproductive health (2015). [Sexual behaviours in children and young people](#).

- They may have been sexually abused by adults, impacting on their self-worth and understanding of healthy relationship boundaries.

Children and young people may engage in harmful sexual behaviours for a range of social and contextual factors. For some young people, engaging in harmful sexual behaviours may be associated with experiences of trauma, sexual or physical abuse, discrimination, disadvantage or exposure to violence.

It may be the case that watching pornography at a young age, especially if it's extreme or violent, encourages harmful sexual behaviours. At the very least, it can give children and young people unrealistic expectations of sex, impacting on their ability to form and maintain intimate relationships later in life.

Children and young people can also be tricked, lured or coerced into harmful sexual behaviour by adult predators online, who often pretend to be children. This abuse can include being manipulated into recording themselves being sexual with a friend or peer, or into giving the predator direct access to the friend or peer.

Children and young people who have had harmful sexual behaviour directed towards them by a peer may have been hurt physically, psychologically and socially. It can make them feel upset, angry, fearful and confused. Often, they also suffer shame and guilt, blaming themselves for getting into the situation or for not being able to stop it, especially if they started as a willing participant. They can also be humiliated and shamed by others, even if they are the victim.

These experiences may affect a young person's future intimate relationships, schooling and work, or lead to engaging in other harmful behaviours such as substance abuse, eating disorders, cutting and other self-harms. Young people may also find lessons about sex, relationships and consent difficult if they bring back traumatic memories. It's essential to support the child or young person to recover from the harm and any ongoing impacts.

The child who was responsible also needs to be supported to understand why what they did was wrong and to change their behaviour, to prevent further harm to themselves and others.

It's important to avoid describing children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours as 'mini adult sex offenders' or 'perpetrators' as these terms are damaging and inaccurate. They don't reflect children's sexual development or the way responsibility for behaviour evolves.

Recent coverage

There are no accurate figures on how common harmful sexual behaviours are among children and young people in Australia. However, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) indicated there may be thousands harmed by the sexual behaviours of other children and young people each year.³

The Royal Commission highlighted the emerging issue of internet access being involved in harmful sexual behaviours. Its findings indicated a need for greater attention to the issue from parents and carers, policy makers, and frontline workers such as educators, social workers, youth workers, doctors and child/adolescent mental health specialists.

eSafety approach

eSafety recommends a child-centred and trauma-informed response to online harmful sexual behaviours among those under 18 year old. It is important that any interventions prioritise and respect their right to sexual information and expression as well as protection from harm.

We also recommend whole-of-community awareness and education programs to promote respectful relationships. This should include helping people recognise signs of harmful behaviours and peer-on-peer abuse, and understand how to respond. Children and young people should be provided age-appropriate information about their rights, what to do if they feel uncomfortable and how to give consent.

³Commonwealth of Australia (2017). Final Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, [Volume 10, Children with harmful sexual behaviours](#).

eSafety's approach to online harmful sexual behaviours among peers is restorative rather than punitive. Our investigators provide information and warnings, and work with children and young people as well as their schools, parents and carers to proactively address all types of negative or harmful online behaviour.

Our programs and strategies support this holistic approach:

- We provide advice and resources that promote respectful online relationships and help-seeking behaviours, tailored to children, young people, parents and carers, and educators.
- Our cyberbullying team helps children and young people who report being seriously threatened, harassed, intimidated or humiliated online, including incidents that involve harmful sexual behaviour such as being sent unwanted sexual content.
- Our image-based abuse team helps people of all ages who report that someone has shared or threatened to share an intimate image or video of them without their consent.
- eSafety alerts social media services to misuse of accounts on their platforms and works with them to remove abusive online content, using existing relationships and escalation pathways.
- Our Cyber Report team takes down content that shows child sexual abuse on the internet, working closely with the global INHOPE network.
- We refer children and young people impacted by harmful sexual behaviours to specialist support services.
- We may also engage police when there is an immediate, serious risk of harm.

Advice for responding to online harmful sexual behaviours

As a parent or carer it's important to have age-appropriate online safety conversations with your children and let them know they can come to you for help if they experience anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

If you are an educator you can also encourage children and young people to speak up if they or someone they know is being harmed online.

It is important to be able to identify the signs of harmful sexual behaviours and respond in a way that recognises the social and contextual factors that may have contributed to the situation. This includes whether the child has been a victim of abuse and maltreatment, their wider experiences of adversity and any additional needs.

Here are some steps to follow:

- Encourage them always to **talk to a trusted adult** about anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe online.
- If a child or young person has a harmful sexual behaviour directed towards them, let them know **it's not their fault**, and that help is available.
- Suggest they **ask the other person to stop**, if it feels safe to communicate with them – sometimes just letting the other person know their behaviour is upsetting can make them realise what they are doing is not right.
- If asking the other person to change their behaviour doesn't work, **don't continue communicating** with them.
- Collect evidence of the inappropriate behaviour, such as screenshots, unless the behaviour includes nude images of someone under 18 years old.
- **Report and block on the site**, app or game where the other person made contact. The eSafety Guide has advice on how to do this on many popular platforms and services.
- **Report to eSafety** – depending on the situation, it could be a cyberbullying or image-based abuse report.

- **Report to police** if the child or young person is in immediate serious danger, by calling Triple Zero (000) or contacting their local police.
- **Get further help and support:** confidential services can be contacted online or by phone:
 - **Kids Helpline** — counselling and online support for kids and teenagers
 - **eheadspace** — online chat and support for young people (12 to 25)
 - **1800RESPECT** — counselling and support for sexual abuse and domestic and family.

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