



# UNDERSTANDING AND RECOGNISING HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

## Why This Matters

As children grow and develop, they explore relationships and sexuality in different ways. While much of this is healthy and age-appropriate, some behaviours can be concerning. It is important for parents to understand what constitutes normal sexual development and what may be harmful. This information sheet provides guidance on recognising harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), the impact of sexting and pornography, and where to seek support.

## Statistics on Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Sexting

- Approximately one-third of all child sexual abuse is committed by other children (NSPCC).
- 30% of teenagers have shared a nude image at least once, and 41% of young people have received a nude photo (Internet Watch Foundation).
- Exposure to pornography among children is increasing, with over 50% of children aged 11-13 having seen explicit content online (BBFC Report, 2021).



## Healthy and Age-Appropriate Sexual Development (Ages 11-18)

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It is natural for young people to explore their sexual identity and relationships. Below are typical behaviours at different ages:



### Ages 11-13

✔ Curiosity about relationships and body changes. ✔ Talking about crushes and first attractions. ✔ Experimenting with friendships and personal boundaries.

✘ Concerns: Persistently sexualised talk, inappropriate touching, coercing others into sexual activities.

### Ages 14-16

✔ Developing romantic relationships and deeper emotional connections. ✔ Interest in sexual content, but within safe and consensual discussions. ✔ Understanding the importance of respect and consent.

✘ Concerns: Sharing or requesting explicit images, excessive consumption of pornography, unwanted sexual contact, aggression related to sexual rejection.

### Ages 17-18

✔ Engaging in consensual intimate relationships. ✔ Understanding personal and legal responsibilities regarding consent and digital safety. ✔ Respecting partner boundaries and managing emotional aspects of relationships.

✘ Concerns: Non-consensual acts, coercion, pressuring others into sexual activity, lack of respect for boundaries, extreme or violent pornography consumption.

## What is Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)?

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) refers to sexual actions that are:

- **Inappropriate for the child's age.**
- **Coercive, non-consensual, or abusive towards others.**
- **Repeated and persistent despite intervention.**
- **Mimicking adult sexual acts in an unhealthy way.**

Examples include:

Forcing or pressuring others into sexual acts.

Sharing or requesting sexual images (sexting) without consent.

Sexual harassment or inappropriate touching.

Using violent or degrading language towards others in a sexual context.

## The Growing Concern of Sexting and Pornography

### Sexting (Sharing Explicit Images/Text)

- Many young people do not realise that sharing explicit images is illegal under UK law for those under 18.
- Once an image is sent, it is difficult to control where it goes or who sees it.
- Victims of sexting often experience bullying, blackmail, and emotional distress.

### Pornography Exposure

- Pornography can create unrealistic expectations of relationships and sexual behaviour.
- It can normalise aggression and unhealthy power dynamics in relationships.
- Frequent exposure may desensitise young people to real intimacy and consent.

## How Can Parents Help?

- **Open Communication:** Talk to your child about relationships, consent, and digital safety.
- **Set Boundaries:** Use parental controls and discuss appropriate online behaviour.
- **Educate About Consequences:** Explain the risks of sexting and pornography exposure.
- **Encourage Healthy Relationships:** Teach respect, consent, and emotional intelligence.
- **Recognise Warning Signs:** Changes in behaviour, secrecy, aggression, or increased isolation.

## Helplines and Support Organisations

### For Parents:

**NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)** – 0808 800 5000 ([www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk))

**Family Lives** – 0808 800 2222 ([www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk))

### For Children and Young People:

**Childline** – 0800 1111 ([www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk))

**The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (Stop It Now!)** – 0808 100 0900 ([www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk))

**ThinkUKnow (Online Safety Advice)** – ([www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk))



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