SAFEGUARDING UPDATE - WHAT DO PARENTS AND CARERS NEED TO KNOW

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

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Harmful sexual behaviour: What parents and carers need to know

New research highlights the importance of recognising concerning sexual behaviour in children, having open conversations and seeking support at an early stage.

On 23rd October 2026, HM Inspectorate of Probation published a new research report, Children and Young People Who Have Displayed Harmful Sexual Behaviour.

The report explores how children develop an understanding of sexual behaviour, why some children may display harmful behaviours and how parents, carers and professionals can respond appropriately.

Importantly, the research emphasises that children who display harmful sexual behaviour are still children and need understanding, appropriate boundaries and support to help them develop safe and healthy relationships.

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

As children grow, it is natural for them to become curious about their bodies, relationships and personal boundaries. However, some sexual behaviours may be inappropriate for their age or development, cause distress or involve harm to another person.

Harmful sexual behaviour can include unwanted sexual touching, pressuring another child into sexual activity, sexual harassment or sharing sexual images without consent.

Not all concerning behaviour is equally serious. The child's age, understanding, developmental needs and the circumstances surrounding the behaviour all need to be considered.

What should parents and carers look out for?

The research highlights several behaviours that may require further attention, particularly when they involve:

- **Pressure or coercion:** A child being forced, threatened or persuaded into sexual behaviour.
- **Unwanted touching:** Sexual touching that makes another child uncomfortable, frightened or distressed.
- **Differences in age or development:** Sexual behaviour involving children with significant differences in age, understanding or power.
- **Repeated concerning behaviour:** Behaviour that continues despite adults explaining appropriate boundaries.
- **Online sexual harm:** Pressure to share nudes or semi-nudes, unwanted sexual messages or the sharing of intimate images.

These signs do not automatically mean that abuse has occurred, but they should not be ignored.

Why might children display harmful sexual behaviour?

There is no single explanation. The report identifies several possible contributing factors, including exposure to inappropriate sexual content, experiences of abuse or trauma, difficulties understanding boundaries and unmet emotional or developmental needs.

Importantly, not every child who displays harmful sexual behaviour has experienced abuse, and children with additional needs should never be automatically viewed as more likely to cause harm.

Understanding what may be behind the behaviour helps adults respond appropriately and identify the support a child may need.

How can parents and carers help?

- **Talk openly and calmly** - Have age-appropriate conversations about healthy relationships, body safety, consent and respecting other people's boundaries. Encourage children to ask questions without feeling embarrassed.
- **Take concerns seriously**- If your child tells you about unwanted sexual behaviour, listen carefully, reassure them that they have done the right thing by speaking up and avoid blaming them. Do not promise to keep the information secret.
- **Set clear boundaries** - Help children understand that nobody has the right to pressure, frighten or touch another person sexually. Explain that they can always say no and seek help from a trusted adult.
- **Be involved in their online lives** - Discuss what children see online, who they communicate with and the risks associated with sexual images, inappropriate messages and online pressure.
- **Seek support early** - If you are worried about your child's behaviour, or something that has happened to them, speak to the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, your GP or children's services. If a child may be at immediate risk, contact the police on 999.

A reassuring message for families

One of the report's important findings is that most children who display harmful sexual behaviour do not go on to commit further sexual offences.

With appropriate support, clear boundaries and positive relationships, many children can learn from their behaviour and develop healthier ways of relating to others.

The priority must always be to protect children who have experienced harm, while ensuring that children who have displayed concerning behaviour receive the support they need.

Where can parents and carers find support?

NSPCC: Advice about keeping children safe, recognising sexual abuse and responding to concerns - **www.nspcc.org.uk**

Stop It Now!: Confidential advice for adults concerned about a child's sexual behaviour or the safety of other children - **www.stopitnow.org.uk**

Key message for parents and carers

Children need adults who will listen, take concerns seriously and respond with care rather than judgement.

Talking about body safety, healthy relationships and personal boundaries from an early age helps children recognise inappropriate behaviour, understand their rights and feel confident asking for help.

Read the full report:
https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/document/children-and-young-people-who-have-displayed-harmful-sexual-behaviour/

Early help and early intervention: What parents and carers need to know

New research highlights why asking for support early, building trusting relationships and working together can make a real difference to children and families. On 29th October 2026, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies published a new report, Early Help and Early Intervention, exploring how families can be better supported before difficulties become more serious.

The research examined 68 studies and identified 18 characteristics associated with effective early help, including trusted relationships, personalised support and professionals working together. Positive outcomes included improvements in children's wellbeing, mental health, education, safeguarding and family relationships.

What are the key messages for parents and carers?

1. Asking for help early can make a difference - You do not need to wait until a situation becomes a crisis before seeking support. If you are worried about your child's behaviour, emotional wellbeing, friendships or difficulties at home, speaking to someone early can help identify practical solutions.

2. Trusted relationships are important - The research highlights the value of families having professionals who listen, understand their circumstances and provide consistent support. Whether this is a teacher, family support worker, health visitor or another trusted professional, feeling comfortable asking questions and sharing concerns can make it easier to access help.

3. Support should reflect your family's individual needs - Every family is different. Effective early help recognises individual circumstances, builds on existing strengths and provides support that is appropriate and flexible. This might involve parenting advice, emotional wellbeing support, help with routines, assistance with school attendance or access to community services.

4. Different services may work together to support your family - Sometimes families benefit from support involving more than one professional or service. Schools, health services, family support teams and other organisations may work together, where appropriate, to ensure that families receive coordinated support rather than having to manage difficulties alone.

5. Families should have a voice in decisions - The research highlights the importance of involving people in decisions about the support they receive. Parents and carers should feel able to explain their concerns, discuss what is working well and contribute to plans that support their child's needs.

How can parents and carers access early help?

If you feel your family would benefit from additional support, you can:

- **Speak to your child's school:** A class teacher, pastoral lead or Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) can discuss your concerns and help identify appropriate support.
- **Contact your local council:** Many local authorities provide Family Help or early help services, including support with parenting, relationships and family wellbeing.
- **Speak to your GP or health visitor:** They can offer advice about emotional wellbeing, development and health-related concerns.
- **Explore local family services:** Family hubs and community organisations may offer parenting programmes, practical advice and opportunities to connect with other families.

You do not need to know exactly what support you require before asking for help. Starting a conversation is often the first step.

Key message for parents and carers

You do not have to wait until things become overwhelming to ask for help. Whether you are concerned about your child's wellbeing, experiencing difficulties at home or simply need some additional guidance, support may be available.

Talking to your child's school or another trusted professional can be an important first step towards finding the right help at the right time.

Read:
https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/early-help-and-early-intervention

Free resources for parents and carers

Stop It Now! – Worried about a child or young person's sexual behaviour: Free, confidential advice and practical guidance for parents and carers concerned about a child's sexual behaviour. Helps families recognise inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviour, understand healthy boundaries and seek appropriate support to keep children safe.

Find out more:
https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/

Family Hubs – Finding early help and family support: Free information to help parents and carers find local Family Hubs offering practical support with parenting, children's emotional wellbeing, family relationships, SEND and financial difficulties. Includes guidance on accessing services and getting help before problems become more serious.

Find out more:
https://familyhubs.campaign.gov.uk/