SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

WITH DR SANDRA WISEMAN

TUESDAY 10TH NOVEMBER 2026 • ISSUE 193

Harmful sexual behaviour: What schools need to know

New research highlights the importance of early identification, proportionate responses and a child-centred approach to harmful sexual behaviour.

On 23rd October 2026, HM Inspectorate of Probation published a new Academic Insights report, Children and Young People Who Have Displayed Harmful Sexual Behaviour, written by Stuart Allardyce and Peter Yates.

The publication provides an opportunity for schools to reflect on how they recognise, respond to and manage harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), particularly in relation to child-on-child abuse, early intervention and safeguarding children who may have experienced or caused harm.

What are the key messages for schools?

1. Recognising harmful sexual behaviour - Harmful sexual behaviour covers a range of sexual behaviours that are inappropriate for a child's age or developmental stage, potentially harmful or abusive. Schools must recognise the difference between developmentally expected behaviour and behaviour that is problematic, abusive or violent.

The context, age and developmental needs of the children involved, alongside any power imbalance, coercion or exploitation, are important considerations.

2. Children who display harmful behaviour may also have safeguarding needs - Research highlights that some children who display harmful sexual behaviour have experienced trauma, abuse, neglect or other adverse childhood experiences.

Schools should therefore avoid viewing these children solely through the behaviour they have displayed. A child-centred approach must consider their wider safeguarding, emotional and developmental needs, while ensuring that children who have experienced harm are protected and supported.

3. Early identification and intervention are essential - Recognising concerning behaviour at an early stage can help prevent further harm. Schools should ensure that staff understand the indicators of harmful sexual behaviour, know how to respond to disclosures and report concerns promptly to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). Responses must be proportionate, informed by risk and focused on the safety and wellbeing of all children involved.

4. Online harmful sexual behaviour must not be overlooked - Harmful sexual behaviour can occur both online and offline. Concerns may involve sexual harassment, coercion, the sharing of nudes and semi-nudes, or inappropriate sexualised communication.

Schools should consider how online behaviours may be connected to wider safeguarding concerns, rather than treating incidents as isolated online safety matters.

5. A coordinated, multi-agency response is important - Managing harmful sexual behaviour may require schools to work closely with children's social care, police, specialist services and families, where appropriate.

Effective safeguarding involves considering the needs of children who have experienced harm, children who have displayed harmful behaviour and any other children who may be affected.

What does this mean in practice under KCSIE 2026?

The findings reinforce the importance of schools maintaining a safeguarding culture in which child-on-child abuse is recognised, challenged and addressed appropriately.
In line with Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026, schools should:

- **Review safeguarding procedures:** Ensure policies clearly address child-on-child abuse, sexual violence, sexual harassment and harmful sexual behaviour.
- **Strengthen staff awareness:** Provide training on recognising concerning sexual behaviours, responding to disclosures and understanding the impact of trauma, SEND and neurodivergence.
- **Maintain accurate safeguarding records:** Record concerns, decisions, referrals, risk assessments and agreed actions, including the rationale for decisions.
- **Develop appropriate safety and support plans:** Protect children who have experienced harm while considering the needs and continued education of children who have displayed harmful behaviour.
- **Review the safeguarding curriculum:** Ensure RSHE and online safety education address healthy relationships, personal boundaries, consent, respect, sexual harassment and seeking help.
- **Listen to pupils:** Use pupil voice to understand whether children feel safe, recognise inappropriate behaviour and know how to report concerns.

The report also highlights the importance of avoiding unnecessary labelling or stigmatisation. Children who display harmful sexual behaviour should be held appropriately accountable while receiving support to develop safer behaviours and healthy relationships.

Key message for school leaders and DSLs

Harmful sexual behaviour must never be dismissed as experimentation, banter or a normal part of growing up without appropriate consideration of the circumstances.

Equally, not every concerning sexual behaviour requires the same response. Schools need to recognise the seriousness of the behaviour, consider the individual circumstances of the children involved and seek specialist advice where necessary.

The October 2026 report is a research publication rather than new statutory guidance. However, it provides valuable evidence to support schools in reviewing their safeguarding practice and strengthening their response to child-on-child abuse.

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

Early help and early intervention: What schools need to know

New research highlights the importance of early identification, trusted relationships and effective multi-agency working in improving outcomes for children and families.

On 29th October 2026, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies published Early Help and Early Intervention, a research report by Eliza Ogden Barnsley and Dr Tom McNeil from the JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls.

The report examines what makes early help effective, drawing on an initial pool of more than 5,000 sources and an in-depth analysis of 68 studies.

It identifies 18 key characteristics of effective early help, grouped into four areas: collaborative partnerships, person-centred approaches, valued staff and strong organisational foundations. Positive outcomes identified in the research include improvements in children's safeguarding, mental health, educational attainment and family wellbeing.

What are the key messages for schools?

1. Early help should begin before concerns escalate - Schools are often among the first professionals to recognise when children and families need additional support. Changes in attendance, behaviour, emotional wellbeing, presentation or family circumstances may indicate emerging needs. Staff should remain professionally curious, recognise patterns of concern and share information promptly with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), rather than waiting for difficulties to become more serious.

2. Trusted relationships make a difference - The research identifies trust, positive relationships and individualised support as important characteristics of effective early intervention. Schools should ensure that children and families feel listened to, understood and supported. A consistent, non-judgemental approach can encourage families to seek help earlier and engage with services.

3. Effective early help requires multi-agency working - The report highlights the importance of collaboration between services. Schools should work alongside children's social care, health professionals, Family Help services and other relevant agencies to identify needs, coordinate support and avoid families having to repeatedly explain their circumstances.

4. Staff need appropriate training and support - Well-trained, supported and consistent practitioners are central to effective early help. School leaders should ensure staff understand how to identify emerging safeguarding concerns, follow referral pathways, share information appropriately and contribute to multi-agency assessments and support plans.

5. Early help must be reviewed to establish its impact - The research emphasises the importance of effective governance, evaluation and adaptability. Schools should consider whether the support provided is making a positive difference, whether children's circumstances are improving and whether additional intervention or escalation is necessary.

What does this mean in practice under KCSIE 2026?

The findings reinforce the importance of early identification, professional curiosity and timely support, consistent with Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026 and Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Schools should:

- **Review early help and Family Help pathways:** Ensure DSLs and relevant staff understand local arrangements for accessing support and making referrals.
- **Identify emerging concerns:** Recognise patterns involving attendance, behaviour, neglect, mental health, family difficulties and unmet needs, including those affecting children with SEND.
- **Strengthen professional curiosity:** Consider the wider circumstances behind presenting concerns and listen to the child's lived experience.
- **Work collaboratively with families:** Involve parents and carers appropriately, building trust and identifying strengths alongside areas of need.
- **Record and review interventions:** Maintain clear records of concerns, actions, support offered, outcomes and decisions to escalate.
- **Escalate concerns when necessary:** Early help must never delay a referral to children's social care where a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

Key message for school leaders and DSLs

Effective early help is not simply about identifying concerns sooner. It is about providing the right support, through the right professionals, at the right time.

The research suggests that interventions combining trusted relationships, coordinated services, trained practitioners and ongoing evaluation are more likely to achieve positive outcomes across several areas of children's lives.

This is a research publication, not new statutory guidance, and the authors acknowledge limitations in establishing which individual approaches directly cause improvements. Nevertheless, it provides a useful opportunity for schools to reflect on whether their current early help arrangements are accessible, coordinated and making a measurable difference.

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

Autumn term 2

Radicalisation -Tuesday 10th November
Child-on-child sexual abuse - Tuesday 17th November
Sexism and sexual harassment - Tuesday 24th November
Child sexual exploitation (CSE) - Tuesday 1st December
County lines - Tuesday 8th December
Trauma - Tuesday 15th December

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