

Safeguarding Scenario 21 - He said it was only a game

🚨 "He said it was only a game. Please don't tell anyone."

During afternoon break, a Year 4 pupil, Sophie, approaches a teaching assistant and asks if she can speak to her privately.

Sophie appears anxious and says: **"Some boys keep following me around at playtime. One of them keeps trying to touch my bottom and yesterday he put his hand inside my skirt. He says it's only a game and everyone thinks it's funny."**

She explains that this has happened several times and that other children have started laughing and encouraging the behaviour.

Sophie then says: **"I told him to stop, but he said I was being stupid. Please don't tell anyone. They'll all hate me and it will get worse."**

The teaching assistant knows that Sophie has recently become reluctant to go outside at breaktimes and has twice complained of feeling unwell before lunch.

Would your team know what to do?



Child-on-child abuse can include sexual harassment, sexual violence, physical abuse, bullying, coercion and abuse involving sexual images.

Importantly, **sexual touching without consent must never be dismissed as banter, curiosity or part of growing up.**

Children can experience serious harm from other children, including in primary schools.

So this is not simply:

- “Children being children.”
- “A playground game that has gone too far.”
- “Something that can be resolved by telling them to stay apart.”
- “An incident that only matters if Sophie was physically injured.”
- “Something we should deal with solely through the behaviour policy.”

 The safeguarding question is:

“What has Sophie experienced, is she safe, and could other children also be at risk?”

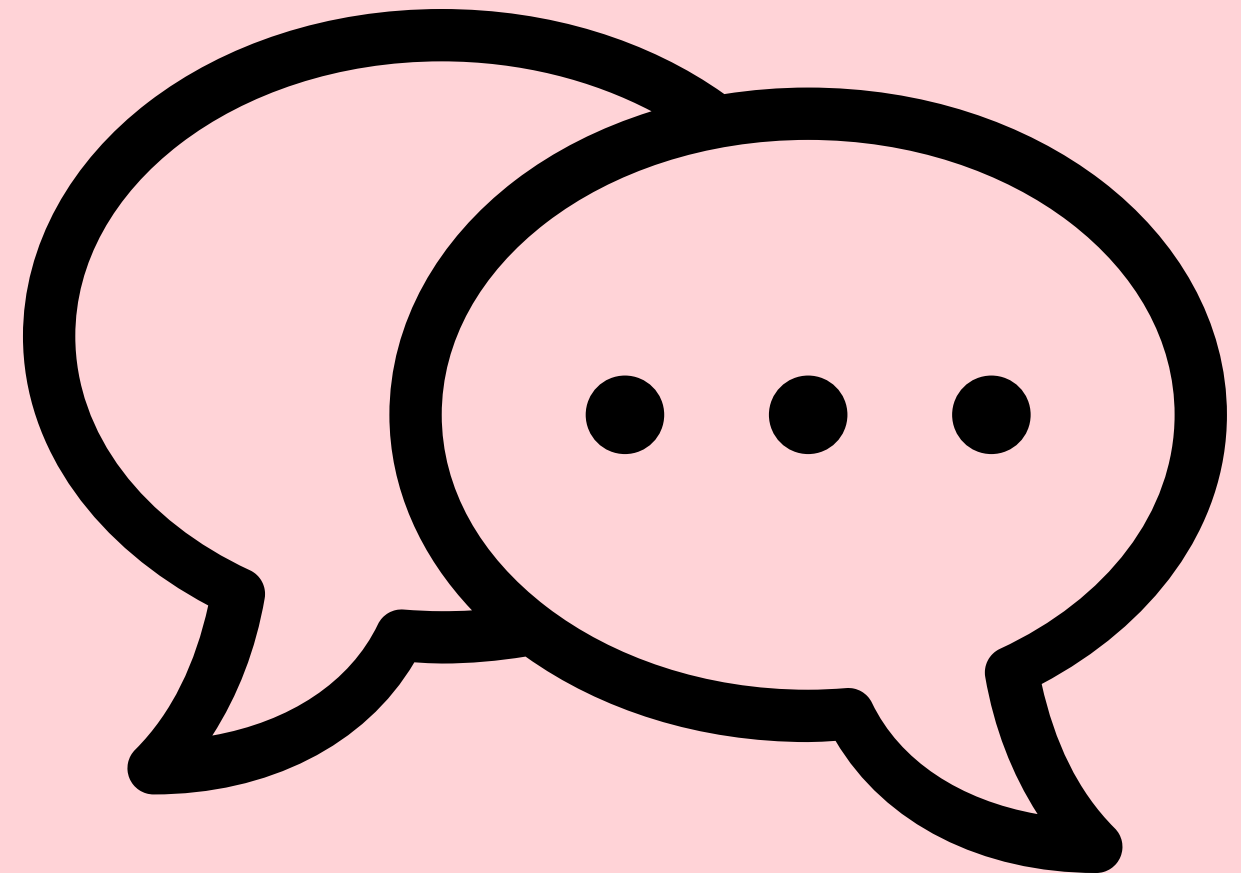
✗ DON'T PROMISE CONFIDENTIALITY

The teaching assistant should not agree to keep Sophie's disclosure secret. Respond calmly, sensitively and without judgement. You might explain:

"Thank you for telling me, Sophie. You've done the right thing. What has happened is not your fault. I can't promise to keep it a secret because I need to help keep you safe, but I will only tell the people who need to help."

Do not minimise the behaviour, suggest Sophie has misunderstood or ask why she did not report it sooner.

Never make the child feel responsible for preventing the behaviour.



✓ **LISTEN – DON'T INVESTIGATE**

Allow Sophie to explain what she wants to tell you. Avoid repeated questioning, leading questions or asking her to demonstrate what happened.

You may need enough information to establish whether there is an immediate risk, for example:

- Is Sophie safe now?
- Is the child involved nearby?
- Is there a risk of further contact or intimidation?
- Are other children potentially affected?
- Does Sophie need immediate medical attention or other urgent support?

Do not ask Sophie to confront the other child, repeat her account to several adults or participate in a mediation meeting.

Where there is an immediate risk of serious harm, follow emergency safeguarding procedures.



THINK SAFEGUARDING – NOT SIMPLY BEHAVIOUR

KCSIE 2026 recognises that child-on-child abuse can occur in any school and that sexual harassment and sexual violence must be taken seriously.

Consider:

- Has this happened previously?
- Has the behaviour escalated?
- Are other pupils encouraging or witnessing the incidents?
- Has Sophie been threatened or pressured into silence?
- Are there particular locations where supervision needs strengthening?
- Could other children have experienced similar behaviour?
- Are there signs of wider harmful sexual behaviour?
- What support might the child alleged to have caused harm also need?

The age of the children does not remove the school's safeguarding responsibilities.

Children under ten are below the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales, but this does not mean sexually harmful behaviour should be ignored or treated as harmless.

SHARE THE CONCERN WITHOUT DELAY

KCSIE 2026 is clear that staff should act immediately when they have a safeguarding concern.

The teaching assistant must report Sophie's disclosure to the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) or deputy without delay, following the school's child protection procedures.

Do not wait for another incident.

Do not attempt to resolve the matter informally with the pupils involved.

The DSL should consider the nature, seriousness and context of the behaviour, the ages and developmental stages of the children, and any immediate safeguarding risks.

Depending on the circumstances, this may include:

- Immediate protective arrangements and safety planning.
- A documented risk and needs assessment.
- Support for Sophie and any other affected children.
- Assessment of the needs of the child alleged to have caused harm.
- Consultation or referral to children's social care.
- Police involvement where appropriate.
- Specialist advice or support concerning harmful sexual behaviour.
- Reviewing playground supervision and wider safeguarding arrangements.

The response must be child-centred, proportionate and informed by the needs and safety of all children involved.

🔒 BE CAREFUL ABOUT CONTACTING PARENTS

Parents should ordinarily be involved in safeguarding concerns affecting their children, but **the timing and manner of communication must be carefully considered.**

The DSL should consider:

- How and when Sophie's parents should be informed.
- Whether contacting parents could create additional safeguarding risks.
- Whether advice is needed from children's social care or police before contacting families.
- How confidentiality will be maintained.
- How to avoid sharing unnecessary information about other children.
- How the school will prevent retaliation or intimidation.

Do not automatically arrange a meeting between the families or ask parents to resolve the matter themselves.



RECORD ACCURATELY

The teaching assistant should make an accurate safeguarding record as soon as possible.

Include:

- Sophie's disclosure, using her exact words where possible.
- The date, time and location of the disclosure.
- Relevant observations about her presentation.
- Any immediate safeguarding actions taken.
- Who the concern was shared with and when.
- Decisions, actions and the reasons for them.
- Any subsequent information or outcomes.
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Avoid assumptions, interpretations or attempts to establish whether Sophie is telling the truth.

The role of staff is to listen, record and report, not investigate.



LOOK AT THE WHOLE PICTURE

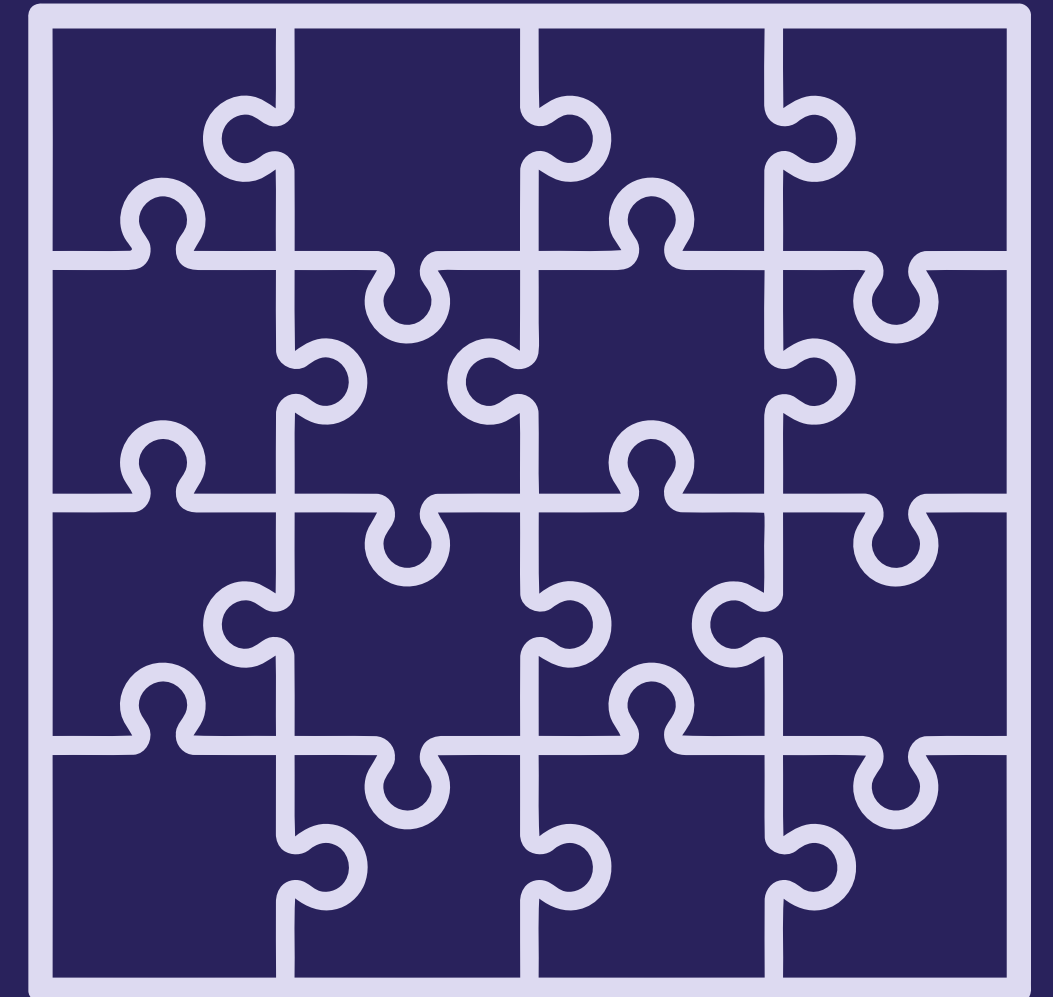
When the DSL reviews Sophie's safeguarding chronology, they identify:

- **Three occasions when Sophie asked to remain inside at breaktime.**
- **Two reports of stomach aches before lunch.**
- **A previous comment that “the boys won't leave me alone”.**
- **A playground incident recorded as “inappropriate behaviour” without further detail.**
- **A recent change in Sophie's friendships and confidence.**

Individually, these observations may not have appeared significant.

However, when considered alongside Sophie's disclosure, they suggest a possible pattern of repeated harmful behaviour that has not previously been recognised.

This highlights why safeguarding concerns must be recorded accurately, reviewed collectively and considered within the wider context of the child's experiences.



The Safeguarding Question

Later, another member of staff says:

“They're only eight and nine years old.
Surely this is just inappropriate behaviour
rather than a safeguarding concern?”



No.

The age of the children does not determine whether behaviour presents a safeguarding risk.

Sexual behaviour between children must be considered in the context of their age, development, understanding, any power imbalance, coercion, repetition and the impact on those involved.

Not all sexual behaviour between children is abusive, but unwanted sexual touching, particularly when repeated or involving intimidation, requires a safeguarding response.

KCSIE 2026 reinforces that schools must maintain a culture in which child-on-child abuse is recognised, concerns are acted upon and victims are supported.

The school must also consider whether the child alleged to have caused harm has unmet needs or may themselves have experienced abuse, exploitation or exposure to inappropriate sexual content.



Safeguarding is about protecting and supporting all children involved, not simply deciding what sanction should be applied.

Sometimes the most important question isn't:

“Are they too young for this to be sexual abuse?”

It is:

“What does this behaviour tell us about the safety, experiences and needs of the children involved, and what must we do to protect them?”

Listen. Don't minimise. Protect. Record. Share. Assess the risk. Act.

