

## Webinar Snapshot

# Understanding harmful sexual behaviours

Supporting children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours is complex and challenging. Dr Joe Tucci, CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation, spoke with Amanda Paton, Dr Gemma McKibbin and Dale Tolliday, about some of the key conceptual and practice tensions researchers and practitioners face around harmful sexual behaviours. This snapshot gives an overview of some of the key learnings from this discussion and includes links to useful models and research.

## Unpacking harmful sexual behaviours

Harmful sexual behaviour is a term used to describe when sexual behaviours are used or displayed by children and young people that are considered harmful.

In the past decade or so, researchers and practitioners have begun moving towards a more holistic, child-centric approach to language, and away from terms such as 'perpetrators' and 'offenders' when referring to those who display harmful sexual behaviours. This shift recognises the developmental context and diversity of these children and young people, including those who have experienced childhood trauma, including sexual abuse, and the importance of ensuring children and young people don't carry stigmatising, shaming labels.



Without a consistent definition of harmful sexual behaviour, the term is used as an umbrella that captures a range of sexual behaviours exhibited by a child or young person that causes harm to either another person or themselves. It is critical however to distinguish between the behaviour and the impact of the harm. Sexual behaviour occurs on a continuum, from developmentally appropriate to inappropriate and outside of social norms to significant sexual abuse. In contrast, the concept of 'harm' goes beyond sexual and physical harm, and can include psychological, emotional and spiritual abuse. The experience of harm is subjective and the victim's perspective on the harm caused to them needs to be honoured.



**Amanda Paton**  
Australian Centre for  
Child Protection,  
University of South Australia

**"The language around it [harmful sexual behaviours] is...really really complicated and it shifts whether you're in a research or a clinical or frontline, or out-of-home care or education setting"**

## Accountability is a process

There's often an expectation that children and young people who use harmful sexual behaviours fully understand the harm they are causing and should just take accountability for their actions. However, there are often underlying factors that contribute to harmful sexual behaviour that need to be considered.

Many of the available assessment tools, frameworks, research and interventions used in this work are heavily influenced by adult paradigms and approaches which are often more punitive in nature.

It is important that adults who engage with children and young people who use harmful sexual behaviours, whether in a therapeutic capacity or in other services and settings, understand that taking responsibility and accountability for using harmful sexual behaviours is complex and takes time. There can be a strong sense of shame that the child or young person doesn't fully understand. The notion of accountability is particularly complex for children and young people with disability or those who are victims of sexual abuse, especially when the impacts of abuse haven't been acknowledged, or in some cases even recognised, by adults.



**Dale Tolliday**  
Children & Young People's  
Sexual Safety Program,  
The Sydney Children's  
Hospitals Network

**"We know it can take some time. It doesn't mean that they are doggedly denying the position. They actually need some time to process and to work this through. And that's sometimes frustrating. It's a tension that's there. But the thing is that these children have got a broad range of circumstances and they're not adults"**

# The importance of family in responding to harmful sexual behaviours

Responding to harmful sexual behaviours requires a multifaceted integrated approach, and those who engage with children and young people who use these behaviours need to consider a range of perspectives, including:

- the child or young person using the behaviour
- the child or young person who has experienced the harm
- the families of the child or young person who has used the behaviour and experienced the harm
- where relevant, the family's broader community.

The family can help to create safety and stability and offer some protection for their child. This is particularly important as often harmful sexual behaviours occur in known relationships, such as with siblings and extended family members or with friends in the school setting. It is particularly complex when the behaviours occur within a family unit as parents, or other caregiving adults, need to navigate two spaces and support the individual needs of both children while keeping the family relationship together.



Dr Gemma McKibbin  
Department of Social Work,  
University of Melbourne

“...the role of family in recovery and therapeutic intervention is fundamental”

However, families need support and guidance on how to navigate this context including how to understand and talk about development, sexual identity, sexuality, safe interactions and consent. They need space to process their own emotions, such as concern, worry and shame. The broader community also has a responsibility and role to challenge stereotypes around and attitudes to gender and masculinity.

## Helpful resources

[Kor et al., Strengthening schools' responses to students' harmful sexual behaviors: A scoping review](#)

[McKibbin et al., Pathways to onset of harmful sexual behavior](#)

[Meiksans et al., A continuum of responses for harmful sexual behaviours](#)

[NSPCC, Harmful sexual behaviour framework](#)

[NSPCC Learning, Understanding sexualised behaviour in children \(Hackett's continuum\)](#)

[Paton & Bromfield, Continuum for understanding harmful sexual behaviours](#)

[Quadara et al., Good practice in delivering and evaluating interventions for young people with harmful sexual behaviours](#)

[#SiblingsToo podcast](#)

[Click here to access a recording of our Harmful sexual behaviours In Conversation Webinar.](#)