

How to support children and young people who display, or are victims of harmful sexual behaviours

*Content warning:
This material contains
information that may be
distressing for readers.*

When we talk about a *child* or *young person*, we mean a person aged **under 18 years**. We recognise and acknowledge the diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and genders of children.



Supporting children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviours

To support children and young people who are causing harm through sexual behaviours, parents, carers and professionals need to demonstrate **understanding** and **compassion**.

If a child or young person displays harmful sexual behaviours (HSB), it is important to take immediate action to stop the behaviour from escalating and keep everyone involved safe. If you have concerns about a child or young person's immediate safety, contact police on 000.

While it is recommended that children and young people who display HSB are formally assessed and have access to specialised therapeutic support, there are a range of things that parents, carers and professionals can do to support the child or young person in the first instance:

- Talk to them and let them know that their behaviour is inappropriate and causing harm, in an age- and developmentally-appropriate way
- Don't use language that stigmatises, shames or makes people feel judged or criminalised such as 'offender' or 'perpetrator'
- Find out what specialist services and supports are available in your area by visiting these [Helplines](#)
- Encourage the child or young person to contact services such as Kids Helpline if they think it will be helpful to stop the behaviours
- Develop a safety plan with the child or young person's input, to keep them and others safe.¹

If you are a carer or work in an organisation, you should follow your organisational policies and procedures. This may include making a report to police or your local child protection service. If you are a mandatory reporter, follow your [state or territory's legislation](#).

Ensure you record any incidents of HSB as this can help to identify changes in a child or young person's behaviour over time.



Supporting children and young people who are victims of harmful sexual behaviours



Children and young people who are victims of HSB may experience different impacts which can effect their relationships, health, social and emotional wellbeing. It can be difficult to tell others what has happened. Victims may feel shame, guilt and blame for what has occurred.² Children and young people who are victims of HSB may have been threatened not to tell, worried about how other people might respond or that they will get in trouble or be concerned about losing their privacy.³

Children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse need a supportive, compassionate and understanding response. Victims may benefit from a range of services, depending on their needs. It is important to support victims to stay safe and manage any ongoing contact with the person who sexually abused them, which may be a sibling, fellow student or peer, or current/ex-partner.

When a child or young person is the victim of HSB that occurs within the family unit it can be especially challenging. Other developmental, cultural and broader community factors can also impact on how victims can be and are supported.

If you are supporting a young person displaying HSB or a victim or survivor of child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviours you may also benefit from professional assistance to ensure you are able to support both yourself and the child/ren and young people in your care.

Find out more

The National Centre has a range of resources to support you to understand and respond to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours. You can access these at: [Resources - The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse](#).

If you need support, please contact:

Lifeline - 13 11 14

13YARN - 13 92 76

1800RESPECT
1800 737 732

Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service
1300 657 380

Kids Helpline
1800 55 1800

¹ [How to manage incidents of harmful sexual behaviour - National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#)

² [Framework for understanding and guiding responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Children. WA Government.](#)

³ [How to manage incidents of harmful sexual behaviour - National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#)