



# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE & HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR



# What is Fearless?

**Fearless.org** is the dedicated youth service from the independent charity Crimestoppers. Developed through consultation with young people, Fearless aims to break down any barriers that might prevent young people from reporting crime. Whether this is a fear of the process or a distrust of the police, we want to empower young people to speak out. We do this by promoting our unique service that gives anyone the opportunity to speak up to stop crime, 100% anonymously.

## How it works?

Young people can pass information about crime to Fearless 100% anonymously via an online form on the Fearless.org website or by calling our **0800 555 111** phone line, 24/7, 365 days a year. After receiving the call or a completed anonymous online form, we create a report that brings together all the information given to us. Our specially trained contact centre staff make sure it doesn't contain any information that could identify who or where the information came from, protecting anonymity. The sanitised report is then sent to the relevant authority with the legal responsibility to investigate crimes, make arrests and charge people in order to bring them to justice. This could be a local police force or an agency such as the UK Border Agency or HM Revenue & Customs.

## Anonymity promise

Anonymous means that your identity is completely unknown. Our promise of anonymity is vital to us as it is what makes our charity unique. We guarantee to young people, indeed everyone, that:

- They can give us information about crime without giving their name or any personal details.
- They will not be asked for their gender or age.
- We will not record any personal details they might mention.
- We physically cannot trace their phone number, email or IP address as our system is designed to protect their identity.

- ✕ **FearlessORG**
- 📷 **Fearlessuk**
- 🎵 **Fearless.org**
- 📺 **FearlessORG**
- 📘 **FearlessAgainstCrime**

**Empowering young people to speak up about crime.**

For more information, visit  
**[www.fearless.org](http://www.fearless.org)**  
Empowering young people to speak up about crime.

# About this resource

This resource has been produced for professionals working with young people throughout the UK. It provides information about child sexual abuse and exploitation as well as harmful sexual behaviour. It includes definitions, advice on how to spot the signs, and guidance to support young people affected by sexual harms. You can use this resource

to help you to discuss young people's perceptions, stimulate debate and encourage conversation around each harm type and reporting.

Fearless is committed to empowering young people to make informed choices about crime that affects them and their communities.

**We hope that by using this resource with the young people you work with, they will:**

1

**Have a greater understanding of specific harms and crimes that affect them and their peers**

2

**Have a greater awareness of safe routes to report crime and criminal behaviour**

3

**Take positive action to make their communities safer for everyone**

**Note:** Using this resource for debate and conversation may lead to disclosures from young people. It is important that any disclosures made to you are managed through your local safeguarding arrangements, and that you follow your settings safeguarding policy. Fearless.org are unable to take information from victims of crime, but at the back of this booklet you will find other agencies that may be able to provide advice, support and guidance.

For more information contact  
the Fearless team  
[fearless@crimestoppers-uk.org](mailto:fearless@crimestoppers-uk.org)







# What is child sexual abuse?

“Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.”

## **Gov.uk – Working together to Safeguard Children**

The sexual activities may include physical contact such as assault by penetration (rape) or non-penetrative acts such as kissing or touching. The sexual activities can also involve non-contact abuse such as forcing children to look at sexual images or forcing children to act in a sexual way. Child Sexual Abuse can occur in person and/or online.

## **What is child sexual exploitation?**

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse.

“It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.”

## **Gov.uk – Working together to Safeguard Children**

Child sexual abuse and exploitation can take place in many contexts, including in the family, in institutional settings such as schools, in relationships or peer groups. Children can be sexually abused by adults or other children and people of every gender.

# Risk factors for child sexual abuse and exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse.

Exchange is a fundamental part of child sexual exploitation, and is what makes child sexual exploitation distinct from other forms of child sexual abuse. This may be an exchange where the child receives something such as a gift, money, affection etc. and/or where the perpetrator gains either financially or in status.

## Who can be a victim of child sexual abuse and exploitation?

Any child can be a victim of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation can happen to any child and young person, and is happening in every area of the UK. It is vital that all professionals working with young people are aware of the definitions and are looking out for the signs to spot.

**Any gender** – Any child or young person of any gender can be a victim.

**Any ethnicity** – Children and young people of all ethnicities can be victims.

**Any age** – There appear to be differences in the ages at which children are most at risk, depending on the type of abuse experienced. It appears that in the family environment, children aged 9 are most at risk of sexual abuse while victimisation online peaks before the age of 13.

A range of sources suggest that children and young people are most at risk of child sexual exploitation between 14 and 15 years old, and that older teenagers are more likely than younger children to receive sexual messages online. Our understanding of when children and young people are most at risk may be impacted by a lack of data around the overall prevalence of child sexual abuse.



**Increased vulnerability factors** – These may include economic vulnerability, prior experience of abuse and/or neglect, homelessness, being in care, having special educational needs or a disability, amongst others. However, it is important to note that child sexual exploitation and abuse can and does occur without any increased vulnerability factors in a child's life.

**Missing children** – Children who regularly go missing may be at greater risk of child sexual exploitation and abuse as research has shown it is a key indicator. However, not all children who are victims of sexual exploitation will go missing.

**Refugee and asylum-seeking children** – Such children face additional risk factors, including existing debt bondage, social isolation, language barriers, and pressures from family abroad who may need monetary support.

It is important to note that far more children are sexually abused and exploited than services identify. The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse estimates that at least one in ten children are sexually abused before the age of 16.

### Far more children are sexually abused than services identify

Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data  
[cscentre.org.uk](https://www.cscentre.org.uk)



**2,700**

children on a child protection plan due to child sexual abuse (England and Wales)

**50,000**

children assessed at risk of sexual abuse\* (England)

**103,000**

child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police (England and Wales)

**500,000**

children are estimated to be sexually abused every year\*\*

Sources: Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes, 2021/22; Department of Education, Characteristics of Children in Need, 2021/22. \*Includes assessments recording concerns of child sexual abuse and exploitation. \*\*Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence estimates by age group (Radford et al, 2011, Childhood abuse and neglect in the UK today) and the Office for National Statistics 2021 Census results. Please note: numbers rounded to the nearest hundred.

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse



# Spotting the signs – child sexual abuse and exploitation

Below are some signs that a child or young person may have experienced or is experiencing child sexual abuse or exploitation.

A young person may not identify or recognise that they are a victim of abuse or exploitation. This is part of the grooming process where a perpetrator works to build a relationship and supposed trust with the young person.

It is important to note that child sexual exploitation does not always occur in isolation. The perpetrator may also be exploiting the young person in other ways including criminally and financially. More can be found out about these crimes types on our website and in our County Lines and Child Financial Exploitation booklets.

**Whilst these are key signs and indicators that a child or young person is being exploited or abused, it is important to recognise that not every child or young person will exhibit these signs and not every young person exhibiting these signs is being exploited or abused.**

**It is important to have professional curiosity, to ask questions and to make an assessment on the signs and risks identified in the young people you are working with.**

## Physical Signs

- Bruising or marks in unusual places
- Bleeding, discharge, pains or soreness in their genital or anal area
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Pregnancy
- Persistent or recurring pain during urination or bowel movements
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Having injuries that cannot be explained

## Emotional / Behavioural Signs

- Avoiding being alone with or frightened of people or a person they know
- Language or sexual behaviour which is out of character or not appropriate for their age
- Unusual changes in personal hygiene (e.g. none or excessive)
- Change in dress, either becoming highly sexual or excessively covering up
- Rejecting or falling out with former friendship group
- Self-harm
- Changes in mood
- Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing for days or weeks at a time
- Suddenly being secretive about who they are talking to or where they are going
- Having large amounts of money on them, or having lots of new stuff such as clothes, jewellery or phones they usually wouldn't be able to afford
- Anxious, frightened, angry or displaying other behaviours that causes you to worry
- Using adult language and/or sexual reference you would not expect that young person to know
- In possession of hotel keys or keys to unknown places

The Children's Society have a helpful website to help professionals spot the signs and indicators of child exploitation: **#LookCloser To Spot Exploitation | The Children's Society ([childrenssociety.org.uk](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk))**

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse have developed a Signs and Indicators Template that helps professionals gather the wider signs and indicators of sexual abuse to build a picture of their concerns: **Signs and indicators of child sexual abuse | CSA Centre**



# Managing and reporting child sexual abuse and exploitation



Any disclosures made have to be managed through your local safeguarding arrangements, and you must follow your organisation's safeguarding policy.

If you know or suspect someone who has caused harm and do not want to speak to the police you can give information 100% anonymously to Fearless via our online form at **Fearless.org** or by calling **Crimestoppers** on **0800 555 111**.

Fearless/Crimestoppers are unable to take information from victims.

**Always call 999 if a child is at immediate risk or call 101 if you think a crime has been committed.**

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) also run a dedicated helpline for children and young people who have experienced abuse at school, and for worried adults and professionals that need support and guidance, including for non-recent abuse. You can use the NSPCC helpline, **Report Abuse in Education on 0800 136 663** or email **help@nspcc.org.uk**





## What is harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is:

‘Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult’

**(Hackett, 2014).**

Children and young people may engage in a wide range of different behaviours as a part of their normal sexual development. However, behaviours that are considered harmful are those that are developmentally inappropriate and fall outside of what would be considered healthy and safe.

Harmful sexual behaviour can occur in person or online. Young people can display it towards their peers or towards younger/older children or towards adults. HSB can be harmful for both the young person displaying the behaviour and the young person it is directed towards.

### **Harmful sexual behaviour**

describes inappropriate, harmful, or abusive sexual behaviour displayed by a child or young person (an individual under the age of 18) towards peers, younger/older children, or adults.

More information about HSB is available on the Shore website  
<https://shorespace.org.uk/topics/harmful-sexual-behaviour/>

## Appropriate language

It is important when working with children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours that we do not place their actions within adult constructs and terms. Children are still developing; emotionally, socially and sexually. As professionals working with children and young people, we need to ensure we are using safe and appropriate terms to avoid any unnecessary stigma, shame and/or trauma for them.

Young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours should not be referred to as ‘sex offenders’, ‘abusers’, or ‘perpetrators’. The phrase ‘child/young person who has displayed harmful sexual behaviour’ should be used. This term ensures the child/young person is seen as an individual and potential victim whilst still acknowledging behaviours of concern.



# How can professionals identify harmful sexual behaviour?

Harmful sexual behaviour sits on a continuum. Sexual behaviour is an expected part of a child/young person's development. As professionals we need to recognise when behaviour is developmentally appropriate for a child/young person's age and when this progresses to problematic and abusive behaviour.

**Some behaviours have the potential to be outside of safe and healthy behaviour. They are behaviours that are:**

- unusual for that particular child or young person
- of potential concern due to age, or developmental differences
- of potential concern due to activity type, frequency, duration or context in which they occur

**Others are outside of safe and healthy behaviour. They may:**

- be excessive, secretive, compulsive, coercive, degrading or threatening
- involve significant age, developmental, or power differences
- be of concern due to the activity type, frequency, duration or the context in which they occur

For further information on Hackett's harmful sexual behaviour continuum, please read **NSPCC's HSB webpage** which explains the full framework. <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour>

Whilst it may not always be the case, professionals working with young people who are displaying harmful sexual behaviours need to consider that this behaviour may be an indicator that the young person themselves is currently or may have previously been a victim of child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation. We must always be mindful of the reasons for a young person's behaviour and approach any form of harmful sexual behaviour through a safeguarding lens.

It's important to note that a child or young person's behaviour must be assessed within their age and developmental context. For example, developmentally appropriate behaviour displayed by adolescents is worrying if exhibited by a young child. Behaviour that falls outside of what is deemed healthy and normal for a specific age group can be defined as 'problematic' or 'harmful' - however, not all harmful behaviour is considered abusive.

Developmentally typical	Problematic	Harmful
<b>Normal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmentally expected and socially acceptable behaviour</li> <li>• Consensual, mutual and reciprocal</li> <li>• Decision making is shared</li> </ul>	<b>Inappropriate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single instances of developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour</li> <li>• Behaviour that may be socially acceptable within a peer group but not in wider society</li> <li>• May involve an inappropriate context for behaviour that would otherwise be considered normal</li> </ul> <b>Problematic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected behaviour</li> <li>• May be compulsive</li> <li>• Consent may be unclear and the behaviour may not be reciprocal</li> <li>• May involve an imbalance of power</li> <li>• Doesn't have an overt element of victimisation</li> </ul>	<b>Abusive</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrusive behaviour</li> <li>• May involve a misuse of power</li> <li>• May be compulsive</li> <li>• May have an element of victimisation</li> <li>• May use coercion and force</li> <li>• May include elements of expressive violence</li> <li>• Informed consent has not been given (or the victim was not able to consent freely)</li> </ul> <b>Violent</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physically violent sexual abuse</li> <li>• Highly intrusive</li> <li>• May involve instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator</li> <li>• May involve sadism</li> </ul>
<b>How to respond</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although green behaviours are not concerning, they still require a response</li> <li>• Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally</li> <li>• Talk to parents about developmentally typical sexualised behaviours</li> <li>• Explain how parents can positively reinforce messages about appropriate sexual behaviour and act to keep their children safe from abuse</li> <li>• Signpost helpful resources like our Talk PANTS' activity pack: <a href="#">Let's talk PANTS   NSPCC</a></li> <li>• Make sure young people know how to behave responsibly and safely</li> </ul>	<b>How to respond</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Amber behaviours should not be ignored</li> <li>• Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally</li> <li>• Consider the child's developmental age as well as their chronological age, alongside wider holistic needs and safeguarding concerns about the problematic sexualised behaviour</li> <li>• Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection</li> <li>• Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a nominated child protection lead who can be notified and will provide support</li> <li>• Consider whether the child or young person needs therapeutic support and make referrals as appropriate</li> </ul>	<b>How to respond</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Red behaviours indicate a need for immediate intervention and action</li> <li>• If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999</li> <li>• Follow your organisation's child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection</li> <li>• Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a nominated child protection lead who should be notified and will provide support</li> <li>• Typically referrals to children's social care and the police would be required. Referrals to therapeutic services should only be made once statutory services have been informed and followed due procedures</li> </ul>

The guide above is a tool to support objective decision making about a child or young person's sexual behaviour and does not replace professional judgement or policy and legislation. Visit [nspcc.org.uk/hsb](https://nspcc.org.uk/hsb) for more information.

# Harmful sexual behaviour in an online context

Children and young people use online spaces and digital communication as a daily part of life. It is therefore necessary for professionals to understand what forms online harmful sexual behaviour can take, as the online environment provides conditions such as anonymity, constant or instant responses and an emphasis on 'likes, fans and followers', that can lead to problematic online behaviour.

Project deSHAME, an EU-funded project to prevent and respond to online sexual harassment, categorises online harmful sexual behaviour into four main types.

- Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos
- Exploitation, coercion and threats
- Sexualised bullying
- Unwanted sexualisation

**It is important to note** that children and young people with special needs, as well as young people that identify as LGBTQ+, may be at higher risk of experiencing and displaying online harmful sexual behaviour. Particularly with regards to children with special needs, the nature of their individual needs may mean they have less awareness of acceptable social behaviour, or that their knowledge of consent and healthy relationships is not at the same developmental stage as their peers.

Further information on Project deSHAME can be found on their website

**Project deSHAME | Childnet**

Stop it Now! Also provide further resources on online harmful sexual behaviour on their website:

**If your child gets into trouble for their online sexual behaviour – Stop It Now**





# Managing and reporting harmful sexual behaviour

If you have identified an incident of harmful sexual behaviour, you will need to follow your local safeguarding protocols to safeguard those displaying the behaviour and those they are displayed towards.

Responding to incidents of harmful sexual behaviour can be a challenge. The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse has created a practical guide for professionals to respond to children's needs and safety when incidents of harmful sexual behaviour occur. The guidance includes key actions to take, a safety plan template for recording and reviewing protocols, as well as broader advice on how to communicate with children and their parents.

The guidance can be found on the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse's website:

**Resources for education settings | CSA Centre**

SWGfL have created a number of helpful resources for education establishments to use as a foundation to effectively identify, recognise and respond to harmful sexual behaviour. A helpful template policy document, guidance on writing effective referrals and a risk assessment tool can all be found here:

**<https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools/>**

You can find some further helpful resources on the last page of this leaflet.

## Can Fearless take information on harmful sexual behaviour?

Always call 999 if a child is at immediate risk or call 101 if you think a crime has been committed.

Fearless can take information on harmful sexual behaviour if you know or suspect who is responsible for committing abusive or violent sexual behaviours.

Fearless are unable to take information when behaviours displayed are in the first three levels of the continuum and are not criminal behaviour.

We cannot take information from victims of crime.



# Are you fearless?

## It's easy to embed Fearless within your school, youth group or organisation.

Our positive call to action can be easily slotted into existing health and wellbeing topics, PHSE lessons, assemblies and awareness days.

### Fearless five top tips

1

Ask IT to add Fearless.org to the list of secure websites that staff and young people can access and add our homepage as an icon to all computer desktops/tablets.

2

Visit our website Fearless.org and request FREE posters to display in your school, youth club etc.

3

Follow us on X @Fearlessorg and retweet our campaigns.

4

Include information about our service within parent newsletters.

5

Tell young people that our service is there for them.

You can also use the Fearless Playing Cards as a prompt for having conversations with young people around knife crime which can be downloaded from our website

[www.fearless.org/en/professionals/resources/downloads](http://www.fearless.org/en/professionals/resources/downloads)

We have a team of Fearless Outreach Workers across the country, delivering workshops to young people and professionals. To find out if there is a Fearless Worker in your area, please email [fearless@crimestoppers-uk.org](mailto:fearless@crimestoppers-uk.org)

## Support services and further information

**If you suspect a child is immediate danger, always call 999 and follow your local safeguarding arrangements.**

### For additional support and information on child sexual abuse and exploitation:

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse: Information for professionals working in education settings - [www.csacentre.org.uk](http://www.csacentre.org.uk)

Barnardo's: further information on child sexual abuse and exploitation - [www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)

NSPCC: further information on child sexual abuse and exploitation - [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

CEOP: The National Crime Agency's CEOP Education team aim to help protect children and young people from online child sexual abuse - [www.ceopeducation.co.uk](http://www.ceopeducation.co.uk)

The Children's Society: further information on preventing child sexual exploitation - [www.childrenssociety.org.uk](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

SEEN: SEEN offers a direct service to children and young people who are sexually exploited/at risk of CSE/going missing from home or care - [www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)

Modern slavery helpline: for information, advice and guidance about any modern slavery issue - **08000 121 700**

Stop It Now: Confidential advice about preventing child sexual abuse, including for anyone worried about a young person's sexual behaviour - [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse: Key research and information on child abuse by adults in online contexts - [www.csacentre.org.uk](http://www.csacentre.org.uk)

Marie Collins Foundation: Provides support to children, young people and families affected by technology-assisted child sexual abuse - [www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk](http://www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk)

Childline: A UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children and young people - [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### For additional support and information on harmful sexual behaviour:

NSPCC: General further information on harmful sexual behaviour - [learning.nspcc.org.uk](http://learning.nspcc.org.uk)

NSPCC's HSB framework: This tool aims to encourage multiagency approaches to working with these young people and their families in the most effective, non-judgemental way possible - [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Stop It Now: General further information on harmful sexual behaviour - [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

Stop It Now: Support for schools and education staff to prevent and respond to harmful sexual behaviour - [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse: Key research and information on harmful sexual behaviour - [www.csacentre.org.uk](http://www.csacentre.org.uk)

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse: HSB Safety Planning Tool for professionals working in education settings. The guide provides a practical step-by-step guide to dealing with HSB incidents in schools - [www.csacentre.org.uk](http://www.csacentre.org.uk)

SWGfL & Marie Collins Foundation: Harmful Sexual Behaviour in School Resources - resources for responding to incidents or issues surrounding harmful sexual behaviours, including a risk assessment template and a support to help professionals write effective referrals to local safeguarding partners: [www.swgfl.org.uk](http://www.swgfl.org.uk)

Project deSHAME: Project deSHAME aims to tackle peer-based online sexual harassment by empowering local communities - [www.childnet.com](http://www.childnet.com)

Shore: A safe space for young people who are concerned about their sexual thoughts and behaviours - [www.shorespace.org.uk](http://www.shorespace.org.uk)

Lucy Faithfull Foundation Inform Young People: An educational programme for young people who have engaged in online HSB - [www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk](http://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk)

Brook: Further information and training on the Brook's traffic light tool - [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

Research in Practice: Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour research review by Simon Hackett - [tce.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk)



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