

**Subject:**

**CHILDREN WHO DISPLAY HARMFUL SEXUALISED BEHAVIOUR**

**Circular Number:**  
**2016/05**

**Date of Issue:**  
20 April 2016

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools
- Education Authority
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Governing Bodies Association
- Independent Schools
- Pre-school providers
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland

**Summary of Contents:**

This Circular provides guidance for schools and other education settings about harmful sexualised behaviour displayed by children and young people.

**Enquiries:**

Any enquiries about the contents of this Circular should be addressed to:

Pupil Support Team  
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**Governor Awareness:**  
Essential

**Status of Contents:**

Guidance for Schools and other education settings

**Related Documents:**

Circular 1999/10 Pastoral Care in Schools

Circular 2015/22 Relationship and Sexuality Guidance

Pastoral Care in Schools - Promoting Positive Behaviour

**Superseded Documents:**  
None

**Expiry Date:** N/A

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## **Purpose of Guidance**

1. This circular offers advice to schools and other education settings on the identification and management of children and young people who display harmful sexualised behaviour. This is a child protection and safeguarding issue and the information in this circular supplements guidance previously provided in 'Pastoral Care in Schools – Child Protection', which issued under cover of Circular 1999/10.
2. The guidance is provided to help schools identify children exhibiting harmful sexualised behaviour and aims to ensure that these children receive an appropriate intervention at an early stage. It does not require schools to develop a new school policy on this area rather, as noted above, it sits within the overall child protection context.
3. As schools are aware, the child protection procedures require that issues of concern, including inappropriate sexual behaviour, should be notified to the designated teacher for child protection. The designated teacher in turn notifies the Principal and together they decide, taking advice as necessary, on the most appropriate course of action.
4. This may result in interventions, which at the more basic level, may be undertaken by the school should they feel confident in doing so. Other interventions, as the behaviours increase in severity or complexity, will require the support of the Education Authority's Child Protection Support Service for Schools (CPSSS). In either event, if schools have any reservations about any of the processes outlined below, or need help in clarifying any of the terms used, staff in the CPSSS will provide support.
5. Although this circular is aimed particularly at schools, the information may also be of interest to those working in the pre-school and youth sectors.

## **What is harmful sexualised behaviour?**

6. Learning about sex and sexual behaviour is a normal part of a child's development. It will help them as they grow up, and as they start to make decisions about relationships. Schools support children and young people, through the Personal Development element of the curriculum, to develop their understanding of

relationships and sexuality and the responsibilities of healthy relationships. Teachers are often therefore in a good position to notice behaviours that give cause for concern.

7. It is important to distinguish between different sexual behaviours – these can be defined as ‘healthy’, ‘problematic’ or ‘harmful’.

**Healthy Sexual Behaviour may include some of the following characteristics:**

- ❖ Mutual
  - ❖ Consensual
  - ❖ Exploratory and age appropriate
  - ❖ Not intended to cause harm
  - ❖ Fun / humorous
  - ❖ Without power differentials
8. Healthy sexual behaviour has generally no need for intervention however there may be instances when interventions are applied, for example, it is not appropriate when displayed in school or during school activities. This may therefore be an opportune time for teachers to positively reinforce appropriate behaviour, drawing on the recently issued guidance issued by the Department on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

**Problematic Sexual Behaviour may include some of the following characteristics:**

- ❖ Not age appropriate
- ❖ One off incident of low key touching over clothes
- ❖ Result of peer pressure
- ❖ Spontaneous rather than planned
- ❖ Lacking in other balancing factors e.g. no intent to cause harm, level of understanding, acceptance of responsibility
- ❖ Targeting other children, to irritate and make feel uncomfortable. Often the children are not scared and can feel free to tell someone
- ❖ Concerning to parents / carers, supportive
- ❖ Sometimes involving substances which disinhibit behaviours

9. Problematic sexual behaviour requires some level of intervention, depending on the activity and level of concern. For example, a one-off incident may simply require liaising with parents on setting clear direction that the behaviour is unacceptable, explaining boundaries and providing information and education. However, if the behaviour is considered to be more serious, perhaps because there are a number of aspects of concern, advice from the Education Authority CPSSS may be required. The CPSSS will advise if additional advice from PSNI or Social Services is required.

**Harmful Sexualised Behaviour may include some of the following characteristics:**

- ❖ Lacks the consent of the victim
- ❖ When the perpetrator uses threats or violence (verbal, physical or emotional) to coerce or intimidate the victim
- ❖ Uses age inappropriate sexually explicit words and phrases
- ❖ Involves inappropriate touching
- ❖ Involves sexual behaviour between children – it is also considered harmful if one of the children is much older – particularly if there is more than two years' difference in age or if one of the children is pre-pubescent and the other is not.
- ❖ Involves a younger child abusing an older child, particularly if they have power over them – for example, if the older child is disabled.

10. Harmful sexualised behaviour will always require intervention and schools should refer to their own child protection policy and, seek the support that is available from the CPSSS – see the paragraph on 'Advice and Support', below.

11. Early therapeutic intervention has a high success rate and few children and young people will continue to engage in harmful sexualised behaviour.

**Assessment Checklist**

12. An Assessment Checklist can be used to evaluate individual incidents, or a series of incidents, retrospectively and are a guide for decision making about level of concern/ intervention. There are 8 factors, drawn from the AIM Project (Assessment, Intervention, Moving On) guidelines, which should be considered. Where only limited

information is available, the checklist should provide a prompt for the information that needs to be gathered.

#### Assessment Factors:

- ❖ The type of sexual behaviour
- ❖ The context of the behaviour
- ❖ The young person's response when challenged about their behaviour
- ❖ The reaction/response of others
- ❖ The relationship between the children / young people / targeted adult
- ❖ The persistence and frequency of the behaviour
- ❖ Any other behavioural problems; and
- ❖ Background information known

#### **General Principles**

13. Whether a child is responsible for harmful sexualised behaviour, is a victim of sexual abuse, or both, it is important to apply principles that remain child centred. Harmful sexualised behaviour displayed by children must be recognised as damaging to both the victim and the child who engages in the abusive behaviour. A child who engages in abuse of this kind may be suffering, or be at risk of, significant harm and may also be in need of protection. Some children who engage in harmful sexualised behaviour are likely to have significant emotional and behavioural difficulties and may have experienced some form of abuse themselves in the past.
14. Nonetheless, in the balance of what is in the child's best interests, the needs of the victim must be given priority; and nothing should be done which causes the victim further harm. The needs of children and young people who engage in harmful sexualised behaviour towards others should be considered separately from the needs of their victims.
15. Schools should be conscious of the fact that it is not appropriate to refer to children or young people displaying harmful sexualised behaviour using such terms as 'sexually aggressive', 'sexually precocious' or 'child perpetrators'.
16. It must also be borne in mind that harmful sexualised behaviour is primarily a child protection concern and should **not** be addressed through the school discipline procedures.

## **Whole school and specific issues**

17. The ethos of the school is important in terms of how all staff model appropriate and acceptable behaviours whether the staff and pupils feel safe, and whether concerns raised are taken seriously.
18. Guidance on recognising and managing such harmful behaviour should be integrated into the school policies on safeguarding and child protection, behaviour and anti-bullying and handled under existing arrangements for recording and reporting.
19. Preventative work can be done through identifying the areas in school where physical, verbal or sexual bullying can take place. Reducing access to or monitoring these areas means fewer incidents are likely, or that these areas of the school are restricted for the pupil whose behaviours are causing the risk.

## **Advice and Support**

20. It can be difficult to distinguish between normal childhood sexual development and experimentation, and sexually inappropriate behaviours. Complicating factors can include the age of the child concerned or whether the child has special educational needs. Professional judgement is therefore likely to be required and schools should contact the CPSSS for support and advice on the appropriate course of action to take.
21. The CPSSS staff group has been trained in using specific education guidelines for identifying and managing harmful sexualised and problematic behaviours in education settings. This includes not only safely managing the pupil whose behaviour may pose a risk but also considering the needs of the pupil(s) already exposed to that risk, as well as safeguarding of the rest of the school population. It also includes consideration of effectively responding to parents.
22. Identification of problematic/harmful behaviours and analysis of any attending risks is based on multi-agency risk assessment and analysis. The CPSSS supports the school Principal and designated Teacher for Child Protection in managing the process and communicating with partner agencies where appropriate (primarily Social Services, the Youth Justice Agency and the PSNI).

Note: The guidance in this document draws, in part, on the AIM Project (Assessment, Intervention, Moving On) guidelines which provide information from research and practice to support education professionals in understanding and appropriately managing pupils with problematic or harmful sexualised behaviours within a school setting. Other organisations that can offer information and support on harmful sexualised behaviour include Barnardo's, Brook (Traffic Light Tool Kit), Nexus & NSPCC.