

Guidance for using the sexual behaviours traffic light tool

Introduction

A guide to identifying sexual behaviours

This innovative resource is based on the original 'Traffic Light Framework' developed by Family Planning Queensland in Australia and has been adapted for use within the UK. The resource uses a traffic light tool to categorise the sexual behaviours of young people, to help professionals:

- make decisions about safeguarding children and young people
- assess and respond appropriately to sexual behaviour in children and young people
- understand healthy sexual development and distinguish it from harmful behaviour

By identifying sexual behaviours as green, amber or red, professionals across different agencies can work to the same criteria when making decisions and protect children and young people with a unified approach.

This resource has been designed to help professionals think through their decisions and does not replace organisational procedures or assessment frameworks.

The resource

Using the resource, professionals can learn to identify, assess and respond to sexual behaviour in children and young people in a confident and appropriate manner.

The resource is based on current knowledge and research, and should be used within the context of your own policies, legal frameworks and competencies, and in conjunction with other relevant assessment tools. It is not intended to replace organisational procedures or assessment frameworks, neither does it cover all presenting behaviours.

The behaviours identified in the tool are examples used to show the differences between healthy and unhealthy sexual development. The resource does not aim to define how children and young people should behave, but to show which behaviours are a natural part of growing up and exploring sexuality, and which are problematic and may need intervention or support.

Professionals who work with children and young people have told us they often struggle to identify which sexual behaviours are potentially harmful and which represent healthy sexual development. It is vital that professionals agree on how behaviours should be categorised regardless of culture, faith, beliefs, and their own experiences or values.

By using a standardised normative list we hope to enable professionals across different agencies to use the same criteria when making decisions, thereby creating a unified approach to protecting children and young people.

Sexual behaviour

Sexual behaviour

Knowing how to take a positive view and recognise healthy sexual behaviour in children and young people helps to support the development of healthy sexuality and protect children and young people from harm or abuse.

Many expressions of sexual behaviour are part of healthy development and no cause for concern. However, when children or young people display sexual behaviour that increases their vulnerability or causes harm to someone else, adults have a responsibility to provide support and protection.

It may be misleading to label behaviours displayed by young children in the birth to 5 category, or even the 5 to 9 category, as 'sexual'. A child who plays with his or her genitals may or may not be seeking sexual pleasure.

It is not clear how aware younger children are of sexual feeling, and behaviours are more likely to be seen as sexual because of the perception of the adult making the observation.

Influences

Many factors influence sexual behaviour, including:

- lack of sex and relationships information
- lack of privacy
- boredom, loneliness, anxiety, confusion or depression
- family/carer conflict or information and support needs
- lack of rules, appropriate consequences or boundaries
- emotional, physical or sexual abuse
- sexual exploitation and/or trafficking
- communication difficulties
- sexual excitement or curiosity
- attention or relationship needs
- gender issues
- copying the behaviour of other children and young people
- copying behaviours seen on the internet or TV

Identifying any of these factors may help you to decide on the most appropriate intervention. However, this is not an exhaustive list and you may need specialist support to clearly identify the reason for the behaviour and the correct intervention.

Dealing with unhealthy sexual behaviour at an early stage can help to prevent subsequent sexually harmful behaviours from developing. Professionals can begin to help young people change their traffic lights from red to amber and/or from amber to green.

Vulnerability

All children and young people are potentially at risk of harm, though some groups – for example, children and young people who have a disability, have been abused, or have experienced other disruptions to their development or socialisation – may be at increased risk of exposure to, or of developing, unhealthy sexual behaviours. It is important to recognise that in these cases extra support and guidance may be needed.

Using the tool

Using the tool

The traffic light tool lists examples of green, amber and red behaviours within four different age groups. These are examples only and must be considered in context.

The age categories deliberately overlap to demonstrate the fluidity and variable nature of development. These are indicative, and understanding may vary. The 13 to 17 age category may also be a useful guide for vulnerable young people, or young people with physical or learning disabilities, up to age 25.

All green, amber and red behaviours require some form of attention and response, but the type of intervention will vary according to the behaviour. Green behaviours may highlight opportunities to provide positive feedback and information that supports healthy sexuality. Amber and red behaviours may require observation, documentation, education, referral to other services, increased supervision, therapy, safeguarding assessment and/or a legal response.

Sexual development is influenced by many factors. When using the traffic light tool to categorise behaviour, it is necessary to consider the current social, cultural, legal, community and familial context.

What if the presenting behaviour is not in the normative list?

The normative lists provides examples of the types of behaviours that would sit within each colour category. If the presenting behaviour is not given as an example it may be useful to consider the following questions:

Is the behaviour consensual for all children or young people involved?

Is the behaviour reflective of natural curiosity or experimentation?

Does the behaviour involve children or young people of a similar age or developmental ability?

Is the behaviour unusual for that particular child or young person?

Is the behaviour excessive, coercive, degrading or threatening?

Is the behaviour occurring in a public or private space? How does this affect the colour categorisation?

Are other children or young people showing signs of alarm or distress as a result of the behaviour?

Female genital mutilation/cutting

Female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision or female genital cutting, is defined by the World Health Organisation as being "all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reason".

FGM is illegal in this country and it is also illegal to take a child out of the country for FGM. FGM is always a safeguarding issue.

It has not been included in the normative lists as it is not a behaviour. However, if it is suspected that a child or young person may be at risk or has been subjected to FGM, this should be treated as a red indicator.

The law

Children, young people, sex and the law

The legal age for children and young people to consent to sex is 16 regardless of sexual orientation. However, young people are unlikely to be prosecuted for mutually agreed sexual activity where there is no evidence of exploitation.

The law does not affect young people's right to confidential advice on contraception, condoms, pregnancy and abortion, or their ability to consent to treatment, even if they are under 16.

Sexual offences legislation in all parts of the United Kingdom assumes that children and young people under 13 do not have the capacity to consent to sexual activity.

It is illegal for an adult who is in a position of trust to a child or young person under the age of 18, such as a teacher or carer, to have sex with them.

The law covers all intercourse, other penetration or sexual touching of a child. It includes sexual touching of any part of their body, clothed or unclothed, either with a body part or with an object.

It is also against the law to persuade a child to take part in sexual activity, to engage in sexual activity in their presence, to cause them to watch a sexual act (including videos, photographs or on websites) or to arrange to meet them following sexual grooming.

Consent

Sexual offences legislation provides statutory definitions of consent that are relevant in the case of offences such as rape, sexual assault and other non-consensual offences.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland a person is deemed to consent if she/he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice. A person may not have the freedom to consent because she/he is forced by, for example, violence or threat of violence, to engage in sexual activity. A person may not have the capacity to consent to sexual activity because, for instance, they have a mental disorder.

In Scotland, consent is defined as free agreement, supplemented with a non-exhaustive list of circumstances in which consent can never be present, such as when the person is incapacitated by drugs or alcohol, or when they are sleeping.

More details on the laws regarding sexual activity with children and young people can be found at:
<http://www.brook.org.uk/professionals/information/sex-and-the-law/consent-to-sexual-relationships>.

Challenges

Recognising the challenges of personal and professional values

Many professionals say they experience a 'gut feeling' when children or young people they are working with are at risk of harm, or of harming others. This resource is designed to support that instinct by helping professionals make effective assessments and decisions.

It is important when making decisions about children and young people that professionals acknowledge that they have their own personal judgements, beliefs and values that could affect their choices. If a behaviour is deemed 'inappropriate' by one professional but does not concern another, young people are more likely to get mixed messages about their sexuality and behaviour.

Beliefs

Culture, beliefs and ethnicity play a vital and challenging role when assessing and responding to sexual behaviour. What is considered 'acceptable' sexual behaviour differs vastly from community to community. It is important to consider that this resource is focused on protecting young people from harm and that this does not differ within the context of beliefs.

Where sexual behaviours are considered to be a safeguarding issue, procedures must be adhered to regardless of culture and beliefs within communities.

Challenging assumptions about gender

Professionals and parents often feel different levels of concern dependent on the gender of the child or young person displaying sexual behaviours. It is important to challenge these concerns and to think about why a behaviour may be considered acceptable for one gender but not for the other. These reactions are likely to be based on personal values, beliefs or social assumptions.

Challenging assumptions about sexuality

Young people become aware of their sexual orientation at different ages and a range of factors will impact at what age they feel safe and ready to explore their sexual orientation and to tell others about it. If a young person comes out as lesbian, gay or bisexual then whatever their age, they should be taken seriously and provided with age-appropriate information and guidance.

It is safe and healthy for all young people, whether they are straight, lesbian, gay or bisexual to begin exploring healthy sexual behaviour. However, professionals often regard sexual contact between young people of the same sex with greater concern than they would regard the same sexual contact between young people of the opposite sex.

The sexual development of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people does not in itself require intervention. If professionals react to behaviour simply because it is taking place between two young people of the same sex, it could lead to those young people feeling ashamed about engaging in what is normal healthy behaviour. It sends the message that there is something 'wrong' with the way their sexuality is developing.

There are things that may legitimately give concerns about the sexual behaviour of young people and may lead to an intervention such as if there were a significant age or developmental difference between the partners or the relationship seemed coercive or abusive. Such things would raise concern regardless of whether that behaviour involves someone of the same sex or opposite sex.

The internet and the media

Children and young people are increasingly exposed to a variety of sexual content through the internet. The accessibility of potentially harmful sexual information, imagery and pornography causes concern from professionals, parents and carers. It is vital that young people are given robust and appropriate sex and relationships education to help them process and question this information.

What next?

I have identified a green behaviour

Green behaviours reflect safe and healthy sexual development. They are:

- displayed between children or young people of similar age or developmental ability
- reflective of natural curiosity, experimentation, consensual activities and positive choices

Expressing sexuality through sexual behaviour is natural, healthy and a part of growing up. Green behaviours provide an opportunity to positively reinforce appropriate behaviour, and to provide further information and support.

All children and young people have the right to relationships and sex education which equips them with the information and skills they need to form healthy and positive sexual relationships and keep their traffic lights green.

I have identified an amber behaviour

Amber behaviours have the potential to be outside of safe and healthy development. They may be:

- 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 the context in which they occur

Amber behaviours signal the need to take notice and gather information to consider appropriate action.

Recognising that behaviour may be unhealthy is the first step in a process. If you are a professional working with young people and your organisation has internal guidance or safeguarding frameworks, please refer to these. You may be required, or feel it is necessary, to inform your safeguarding lead or another member of staff.

Amber behaviours cannot be ignored, and it is important to think through the options available to you. Consider why the behaviours may be being displayed, and, where possible, gather further information and continue to monitor behaviour.

I have identified a red behaviour

Red behaviours are outside of safe and healthy behaviour. They may be:

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

Red behaviours indicate a need for immediate intervention and action, though it is important to consider actions carefully. When determining the appropriate action, identify the behaviour, consider the context and be guided by:

- relevant national legislation and guidance
- organisational policies, procedures and guidance
- human rights
- the identified risks or needs of the young person
- the potential or real risks to others

If you are a professional working with young people and your organisation has internal guidance or safeguarding frameworks, please refer to these to decide on the next steps to take. Your policy or procedure should guide you towards a designated safeguarding lead who can be notified and will provide support.

I am not a professional working with young people. Where can I go for help?

If you are not a professional working within an organisation with internal procedures or frameworks, you may want to consider contacting a specialist organisation that can advise you. These include:

- Young people's sexual health services: if you are under 25 contact Ask Brook, www.askbrook.org.uk
- Contraceptive and sexual health information: visit FPA on www.fpa.org.uk
- NSPCC Helpline: 0800 800 5000 (England and Wales) or www.nspcc.org.uk
- National Child Protection Line: 0800 022 3222 (Scotland)
- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP): 0870 000 3344 or www.ceop.police.uk
- Stop it Now!: 0808 1000 900 or www.stopitnow.org.uk
- Parents Protect!: 0808 1000 900 or www.parentsprotect.co.uk

being published. As information and knowledge is constantly changing, readers are strongly advised to use this information for up to one month from print date. Brook accepts no responsibility for difficulties that may arise as a result of an individual acting on the advice and recommendations it contains.