



Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Safeguarding Children Partnership Board

Child Sexual Behaviour Assessment Tool

2024-2026

This tool has been adapted with kind permission from

- Calderdale Safeguarding Children Partnership's Harmful Sexual Behaviour Tool;
- NHS Forth Valley's Preventing and Managing Harmful Sexual Behaviour Guidelines

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Introduction

Most children display a range of sexualised behaviours as they grow. Parents, carers and/or professionals may need reassurance that the child is exploring their sexuality in a healthy way. However, some children may display problematic or abusive sexualised behaviour that can be harmful to the children who display it as well as the people it is directed towards. If a child is displaying harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) you may need to provide them with appropriate advice and make a referral for relevant support.

Age of consent

In each UK nation, the age of consent (the legal age when people can engage in sexual activity) is 16 years old. This is the same regardless of the person's gender identity, sexual identity and whether the sexual activity is between people of the same or different gender. All sexual activity involving under 16's is illegal. However, contextual factors are relevant when considering responses. The law is there to protect children from abuse or exploitation, rather than to prosecute under-16s who participate in mutually consenting sexual activity. Underage sexual activity should always be seen as a possible indicator of child sexual exploitation.

The law says anyone under the age of 13 can never legally give consent. ([Sexual Offences Act 2003](#)) Following any sexual activity involving a child under 13, a child protection referral must be considered and any decision not to make such a referral must be justified and recorded.

- Consent consists of: (1) **Choice** – both respecting and agreeing, (2) **Freedom** – to choose without pressure from the other, (3) **Capacity** – to understand the choice.
- Relevant factors to consider include: was “no” an option?, pressure, pestering, bribery, emotional blackmail, threats, intellectual ability, power imbalance, age, age difference, influence of alcohol/drugs etc.

Step one: gathering information

You need to gather as much information as possible so that you can work out whether a child is displaying healthy, problematic or harmful sexual behaviour.

Remember that for many children and parents this is a sensitive topic. Listen non-judgementally to what they are telling you.

Initially, record the nature of the behaviour (what exactly did they say/do?), where and when it happened, who else was there and what their reaction was, what were the responses from adults (at the time and subsequently) and what is the child's attitude to the behaviour?

This information may help you to recognise patterns of behaviour, identify triggers or helpful adult responses etc. In turn, this will inform intervention and support needs.

This Tool is intended to support decision-making re: next steps. If referrals to other agencies are necessary, the information gathered at this stage should accompany and support those referrals.

You should also consider:

- **The age of the child or young person who has displayed HSB.** As children grow up they develop sexually. What is 'normal' sexual behaviour for a 15 year old may be problematic or harmful for an eight year old. Consider the child's developmental ability as well as their chronological age.
- **The age of the other children or young people involved.** If the children involved are the same age/developmental ability the behaviour may be considered 'normal'. But if the children are of different ages/developmental abilities, the behaviour might be problematic or harmful.
- **Children with additional needs.** When considering children and young people with additional needs practitioners need to evaluate sexual behaviours, considering developmental stages (physical, emotional, intellectual, social), as well as chronological age.

Indicators that behaviour is problematic or harmful

You should try to find out as much as possible about the behaviour that is being displayed. Listen carefully, be curious and avoid shaming the child.

You should also consider:

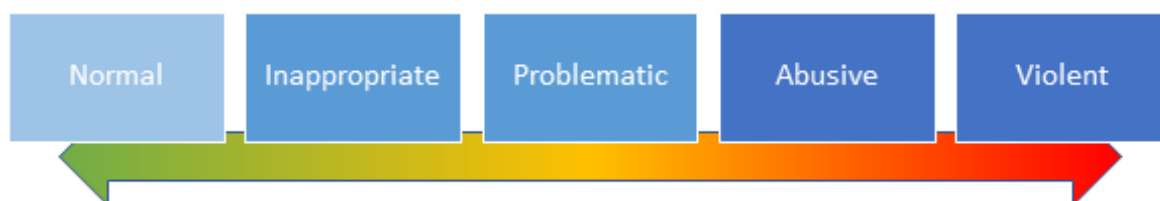
- **Is the behaviour unusual for that particular child or young person?**
Children naturally explore and experiment with their sexuality as they grow up. If the behaviour seems to go beyond curiosity, for example if it is obsessive, this might indicate it is harmful. If a child's behaviour is out of character, it is important to take time to consider why the child is behaving unusually.
- **Have all the children or young people involved freely given consent?**
If the behaviour involves coercion, intimidation or forcing others to take part, it should be considered harmful.
- **Are the other children or young people distressed?**
If the behaviour is upsetting others, this indicates it is problematic.
- **Is there an imbalance of power?**
If the child displaying the behaviour is in a more powerful position than the other children involved, this indicates it is problematic. This might happen if there are significant differences in age, size, power or developmental ability.
- **Is the behaviour excessive, degrading or threatening?**
Excessive behaviour means behaviour that is obsessive, persistent, compulsive or has been going on for a long time. Any behaviour that involves force, coercion, bribery or threats is harmful.
- **Is the behaviour occurring in a public or private space?**
If the behaviour is particularly secretive or is being carried out in private after intervention from adults, this may be a cause for concern.

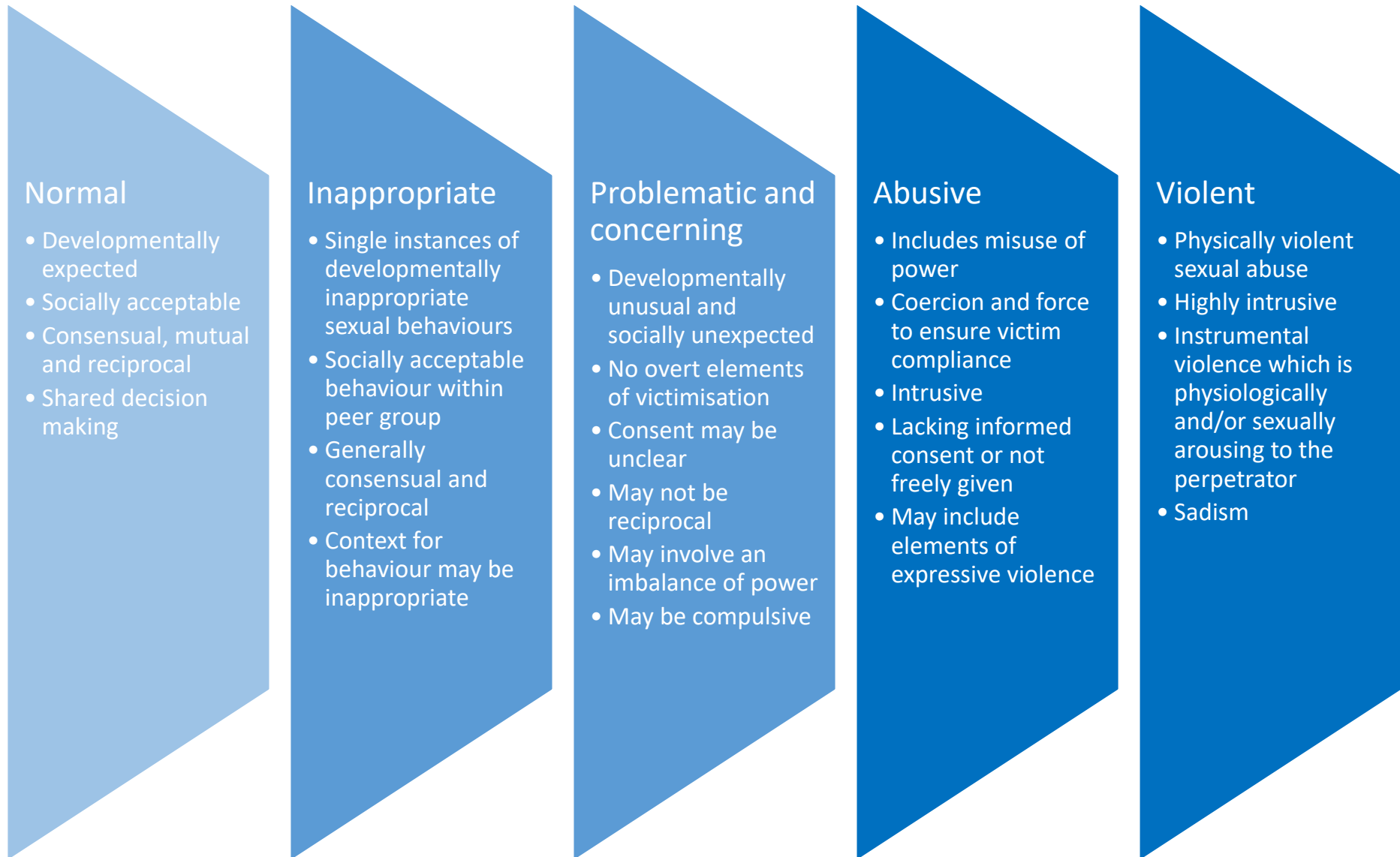
Step two: assessing the behaviour

Sexualised behaviour should be seen as a continuum, ranging from 'normal' to 'inappropriate', to problematic, on to 'abusive' and to 'violent' behaviours (Hackett, 2010).

Using the information you have gathered, along with the examples provided on pages 9-16, consider where the child or young person's behaviour sits on the continuum

Please note that the examples given are guidelines. Specific incidents may have mitigating or aggravating features that move assessment of a particular behaviour, up or down the continuum.





Step three: taking action

Your response to a child displaying sexualised behaviours should vary depending on the child's age, stage of development and the type of behaviours being displayed.

Your approach should focus on the needs of the child at all times.

Normal behaviours

It is healthy for children to be curious about their own and other people's bodies. The process of experimentation and exploration mean that children and young people will get it wrong from time to time but this may not indicate a serious concern.

How to respond

- Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally.
- Talk to parents about developmentally typical sexualised behaviours.
- Explain how parents can positively reinforce messages about appropriate sexual behaviour and act to keep their children safe from abuse.
- Make sure young people know how to behave responsibly and safely. For example two 15-year-olds having consensual sex might benefit from a conversation about contraception and consent.

Inappropriate, problematic or concerning behaviours

Although these behaviours are not abusive or violent, they should not be ignored. Identification of these behaviours creates an opportunity to intervene, educate and support children and their families. The child or young person will need support to help them change their behaviour and stop the behaviour escalating.

How to respond

- Listen to what children and young people have to say and respond calmly and non-judgementally.
- Using the information you have gathered, identify what interventions and support are needed. Initially, this may involve risk management/safety plans that employ external controls (monitoring, restriction of movements etc.), to avoid exposing the child to situations that might lead to further HSB.
- Risk management/safety plans must be reviewed regularly, to ensure they remain proportionate and take account of developmental needs. Restrictive plans may exacerbate issues such as isolation, loneliness, feeling different/dangerous etc. and decrease opportunities for positive social interactions etc. This, in turn, may increase risk and vulnerability in the medium and long term.
- Develop plans that address the needs you have identified. This should be done in collaboration with the child and family.
- Unmet, identified needs may require referral to other agencies.
- Follow your agency's safeguarding procedures.

Abusive and violent behaviours

Abusive and/or violent behaviours need **immediate** intervention and action. You should consider whether the child or young person displaying the behaviour is at risk and take the necessary action to protect them. You also need to take action to mitigate the risk their behaviour may pose to others.

How to respond

- If a child is in immediate danger, call the police on 999.
- If a child is not in immediate danger: Follow child protection procedures and make a report to the person responsible for child protection. A link to the referral form can be found here <https://www.safeguardingcambspeterborough.org.uk/concerned/>

Make use of your Local Authority's HSB Service for a consultation to discuss your concerns, receive support or for guidance in using this tool.

Peterborough Youth Justice Service offers case consultations and support to any professional working with a Peterborough based child and young person, 17 and younger.

Details for Peterborough:

rian.perry@peterborough.gov.uk

Tel: 07901 517947 / 01733 864210

For Cambridgeshire children, the Cambridgeshire Sexual Behaviour Service offers a similar service:

SexualBehaviourService@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Child Sexual Behaviour Assessment Tool

The information contained within this continuum is not prescriptive. Each child should be considered in their own right, taking into account additional information for example additional needs. If you are unsure where a child sits on this continuum you can contact the HSB officers for discussion (see contact details on page 8).

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
0 – 4 years: infant, toddler, pre-school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touching or rubbing their own genitals • Enjoying being nude • Showing others their genitals • Playing 'mummies and daddies' or 'doctors and nurses' • Touching or curious about other children's genitals • Touching or curious about breasts, bottoms or genitals of adults • Interest in body parts and what they do • Curiosity about the differences between boys and girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-off / infrequent occurring behaviours that generally stop when addressed • The behaviour is not the main focus for the child / The child is interested in other things • Pulling other children's pants down/skirts up/trousers down • Following others into toilets or changing rooms to look at them or touch them • Talking about sexual activities seen on TV/online • Engaging peers in sexual play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preoccupation with adult sexual behaviour • Persistent masturbation that does not cease when addressed. • Touching the private parts of adults not known to the child. • Preoccupation with touching the genitals of other people • Talking about sex using adult slang or age-inappropriate language • Sexualising play with dolls such as 'humping' a teddy bear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistently touching the genitals of other children or adults • Simulation of sexual activity in play • Sexual behaviour between young children involving penetration with objects • Forcing other children to engage in sexual play • Touching or rubbing themselves to the exclusion of normal childhood activities; hurting their own genitals by rubbing or touching. • Oral sex • Accessing sexual material online

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using slang words/dirty language for bathroom and sexual functions Playing age - appropriate games or videos on electronic devices, under supervision (low risk for sexually abusive behaviours) 			
5 – 9 years: early school years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feeling and touching own genitals, including masturbating Curiosity about other children's genitals Curiosity about sex and relationships, e.g. differences between boys and girls, how sex happens, where babies come from, same-sex relationships Sense of privacy about bodies Telling stories or asking questions using swear and slang words for parts of the body 'Show me yours/I'll show you mine' with same age children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-off / infrequent occurring behaviours that generally stop when addressed The behaviour is not the main focus for the child / The child is interested in other things Questions about sexual activity which persist or are repeated frequently, despite an answer having been given Use of adult slang language to discuss sex Continually touching their own genitals in public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There may be some elements of planning, but this is not well developed Child responsive to intervention but might need to be reminded of appropriateness at times Some factors/dynamics which might suggest one child is more in control than the other(s) Sexual bullying, face to face or through texts or online messaging Persistent appearance of sexual images and ideas in talk, play and art 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Frequent masturbation in front of others Sexual behaviour engaging significantly younger or less able children Forcing other children to take part in sexual activities Simulation of oral or penetrative sex Accessing pornographic material online Exposing other children to pornography online Touching or rubbing themselves persistently in private or public to

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing and telling age appropriate 'dirty' jokes • Using slang words/dirty language for bathroom and sexual functions, talking about 'sex' • Playing 'mummies and daddies' • Kissing, holding hands • Mimicking or practicing observed behaviours such as pinching a bottom • Increased curiosity in adult sexual behaviour ('where do babies come from?' etc) • Using photos, videos to record their life • Accidental access to pornography (risk for sexually abusive behaviours) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in mutual masturbation • Continually wanting to touch the private parts of other children • Wanting to play sexual games with much older, or much younger, children • Increasing preoccupation with accessing pornography and playing violent or sexual video games • Having unmonitored social media accounts and spending a lot of time online • Sending or requesting sexual pictures, including nude or semi-nude images • The child may apply some pressure, but does not persist if others do not comply 	<p>the exclusion of normal childhood activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rubbing their genitals on other people • Forcing other children to play sexual games • Talking about sex and sexual acts habitually • Posting sexual images or videos online • Cyber bullying others using intimate images to extort other children • Grooming other children • Meeting online 'friends' face to face (risk of sexual assault)

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
10 – 13 years: pre-adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solitary masturbation • Use of sexual language including swear and slang words • Having girl/boyfriends who are of the same, opposite or any gender • Interest in popular culture, e.g. fashion, music, media, online games, chatting online • Need for privacy • Consensual kissing, hugging, holding hands with peers • ‘Show me yours/I’ll show you mine’ with peers • Kissing and flirting • Genital or reproduction conversations with peers • ‘Dirty’ words or jokes with their peer group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviours might repeat but do not persist if addressed • Accepting of the adult’s perspective and changes behaviour • There are no real or clear power imbalances with behaviours/interactions • Peeping or flashing behaviours e.g. exposing genitals or mooning • Sexual obscenities or language, but not persistent • Attempting to expose others’ genitals • Sexual knowledge too advanced for their age, once context is considered • Mutual masturbation/group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some escalation in behaviours over time / repetitive Inappropriate sexual behaviour, after it was addressed • The child is aware that their behaviour is not acceptable and might understand why, but continue to engage in it • Verbal, physical or cyber bullying involving sexual themes or sexual aggression • LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) targeted bullying • Pre-occupation with masturbation which impacts normal daily life • Sending/Sharing non-consensual nude images of self or others or requesting images (legal implication) • Interest in sexual behaviour is out of balance with other aspects of the young person’s life, but it is not all consuming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non consensual sexual activity e.g. oral sex or intercourse • Exposing genitals or masturbating in public • Sexual harassment • Genital injury to self or others • Sexually explicit threats - written or verbal • Degradation/humiliation of themselves or others using sexual themes • Forcing other children of same age, younger or less able to take part in sexual activities • Sexually explicit talk with younger children • Forced exposure of others’ genitals • Compulsive masturbation, including task interruption to masturbate

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having own social media accounts that are monitored by parents/carers • Using photos, videos to record their life (low risk) • Playing age appropriate games online (low risk) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • masturbation (same age group) • Curious about / Viewing pornographic material • Taking nude, sexual images of themselves • Secretive about using the internet/social media (risk of being groomed or exploited) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in sexual conversations online with strangers • Uncharacteristic and risk-related behaviour, e.g. sudden and/or provocative changes in dress, withdrawal from friends, mixing with new or older people, having more or less money than usual, going missing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeated or chronic peeping, exposing or using obscenities • Chronic pornographic interest including child pornography • Touching the genitals of others without permission • Simulating intercourse with peers with clothes off • Sexual contact with animals • Taking/sharing nude sexual images of others • Having suggestive avatars (online characters) or usernames (risk of grooming)
14 – 17 years adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solitary masturbation • Sexually explicit conversations with peers • Obscenities and jokes within the current cultural norm • Interest in erotica / pornography 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no power imbalances with behaviours/interactions • Accepting of the adult's perspective and changes behaviour • Young person may have tested a few boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Escalation in behaviours over time • Sending/Sharing non-consensual nude or sexually provocative images of self or others (legal implication) • Joining adult-only social network sites and giving false personal information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposing genitals or masturbating in public • Compulsive masturbation, especially chronic or public. • Preoccupation with sex, which interferes with daily function, • Sexual degradation / humiliation of self or others

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having sexual or non-sexual relationships • Sexual activity including hugging, kissing, holding hands • Consenting oral and/or penetrative sex with others of the same or opposite gender who are of similar age and developmental ability • Choosing not to be sexually active • Use of internet to chat online. • Viewing sexual content for arousal (low risk) 	<p>but is generally rule abiding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in sexual conversations online with strangers (consider age of others involved) • Experimental or sexual attention seeking with no intent to harm others (<i>e.g. flirting or asking for non-nude images</i>) • Single occurrence of peeping, exposing, using obscenities • Generally consensual and reciprocal behaviours, even if adults would not approve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessing exploitative or violent pornography • Pre-occupation with chatting online, giving out personal details, meeting online acquaintances • Sexual pre-occupation/behaviours that interferes with daily functions (<i>e.g. masturbation</i>) • Unsafe sexual practices • Sharing sexually aggressive thoughts or fantasies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genital injury to self or others • Attempting/forcing others to expose genitals • Sexually aggressive / exploitative behaviour • Sexually explicit talk with younger children • Sexual contact with others where there is a big difference in age or ability • Non-consensual sexual activity • Touching the genitals of others without permission/consent • Sexually explicit threats - written or verbal • Sexual harassment • Sexual contact with animals • Repeated or chronic peeping, exposing or using obscenities.

	Normal	Inappropriate	Problematic or concerning	Abusive and Violent
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of/acceptance of power and control in sexual relationships • Involvement in sexual exploitation and/or trafficking of others • Chronic pornographic interest, including child pornography • Degradation/humiliation of themselves or others using sexual themes • Taking sexual images of others to exploit them (child pornography, exploitation risk) • Having multiple nude images of others (risks as above plus exploitation) • Downloading, distributing or producing sexual images which involve a criminal or abusive element, without adult involvement

Adapted from Gil 1993; Cavanagh Johnson 1999; Ryan 2000; Barnett et al, 2007 and Hackett 2010.

References:

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