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## **Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF)**

### ***Working group on responses to violence against children (CDENF-GT-VAE)***

#### **Harmful sexual behaviour by children: overview of first responses identified and proposals for further action**

*Information note prepared by the Secretariat*

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## 1. Background

At the [Mid-term evaluation conference of the Strategy for the Rights of the Child \(2016-2021\)](#), held in Strasbourg on 13-14 November 2019, the issue of sexual abusive behaviour by children towards peers or younger children was identified as a topical children's rights challenge. This was notably due to the fact that, in the past, responses provided to such "harmful sexual behaviour" had not always been appropriate. Child rights experts at the conference and beyond widely agree that the best responses are not of judicial nature, resulting in children being treated as sexual offenders, but called for therapeutic or social service interventions through which the child is supported, as a person in need of professional help or even as a victim (if the harmful behaviour has root causes in the child's early years).

Based on such considerations and first evidence, the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF) has been assigned with the following specific task in its 2020-2021 mandate:

*"(iii) Continue work to enhance the implementation of international and Council of Europe standards on the protection of children from violence in member States, notably through the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (18 November) and the development of non-binding instruments (e.g. guidelines, guide to good practices, recommendation) on systems for professionals to report violence against children, and **on measures and interventions aimed at preventing peer violence and sexual abusive behaviour by children.**"*

The CDENF has subsequently mandated its Working Group on responses to violence against children (CDENF-GT-VAE; "VAE group") with the task to:

"a) [Contribute] to the development of non-binding instruments or tools containing relevant guidance for member states, to be approved by the CDENF:

- on systems for professionals to report violence against children, and
- **on measures and interventions aimed at preventing peer violence and sexual abusive behaviour by children"**

## 2. Contents of the present document

Following the presentation of a [study](#) prepared by Prof. Simon Hackett, Durham University (UK), the present information note compiles some of the key information and recommendations prepared by the researcher, combining it with evidence provided during a relevant exchange of views with professionals working with children displaying harmful sexual behaviour towards other children, as well as the results of additional desktop research undertaken by the Secretariat.

The document shall serve as a basis for the consideration of next steps ahead in this activity, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the VAE group to be held on 1-2 December 2020. It shall be reviewed and completed by the Working Group with a view to guiding the Secretariat in further work to be undertaken in 2021.

## 3. Questions to be considered by the VAE group

The CDENF-GT-VAE is invited to take note of the paper and consider next steps ahead by reflecting on the following questions:

- With a view to working towards a possible non-binding instrument by the Council of Europe, is it of interest to undertake a survey, either in the VAE working group or in the CDENF in plenary, to learn more about the current responses provided to children displaying harmful sexual behaviour and identify any good and innovative practices and measures in terms of legislation, policies and practice?
- Should an upcoming non-binding instrument address "harmful sexual behaviour" as such or rather look at more specific aspects, including specific policies that may be part of a response to the matter, e.g. sex and relationship education, wider awareness-raising and training of parents and professionals working with children, or targeted mental health interventions?



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25 November 2020

## Harmful sexual behaviour by children: overview of first responses identified and proposals for further action

Information note prepared by the Children's Rights Division

This document is the result of research involving different academic articles and publications on the issue of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) displayed by children, as well as exchanges with specialised professionals who work with children displaying such behaviour. Based on these resources, it provides an overview of the current state of knowledge of children with HSB, and gives first recommendations on ways to go forward to address this issue.

This present note is structured in the following way:

- Background
- Relevant international and regional standards
- Types of harmful sexual behaviour and characteristics of children
- Responses to harmful sexual behaviour
- Recommendations
- Annex I: Initiatives aimed at children with harmful sexual behaviour – Examples identified in selected Council of Europe member states
- Annex II: Further resources

## I – Background

### 1. Defining the issue

“Children” refers to all people under the age of 18 years, in line with Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>1</sup>

A large variety of terms have been used to describe children who sexually abuse other children. To date, there is no universally accepted term or definition to describe such behaviours. Among others, “sexually abusive behaviour”, “sexually problematic behaviour”, or “juvenile sex offender” can be seen as referring to the act of children who sexually abuse other children in publications and articles from different Council of Europe member states.

In order to avoid labelling and stigmatising children as sexual offenders and to encompass a broad spectrum of behaviour, the term of “**harmful sexual behaviour**” (HSB) will be used in this paper. Professor Simon Hackett’s definition of the term will be used:

*“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 and/or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult”.*<sup>2</sup>

A child’s sexual behaviour can be categorised by the following continuum developed by Professor Simon Hackett (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> This continuum ranges from “normal” to “violent” behaviour. Categorisation of a child’s behaviour in this **continuum** needs to be adapted to every individual child, as behaviour may be considered normal or concerning according to, *inter alia*, the child’s gender and developmental stage, or cultural context.<sup>4</sup>

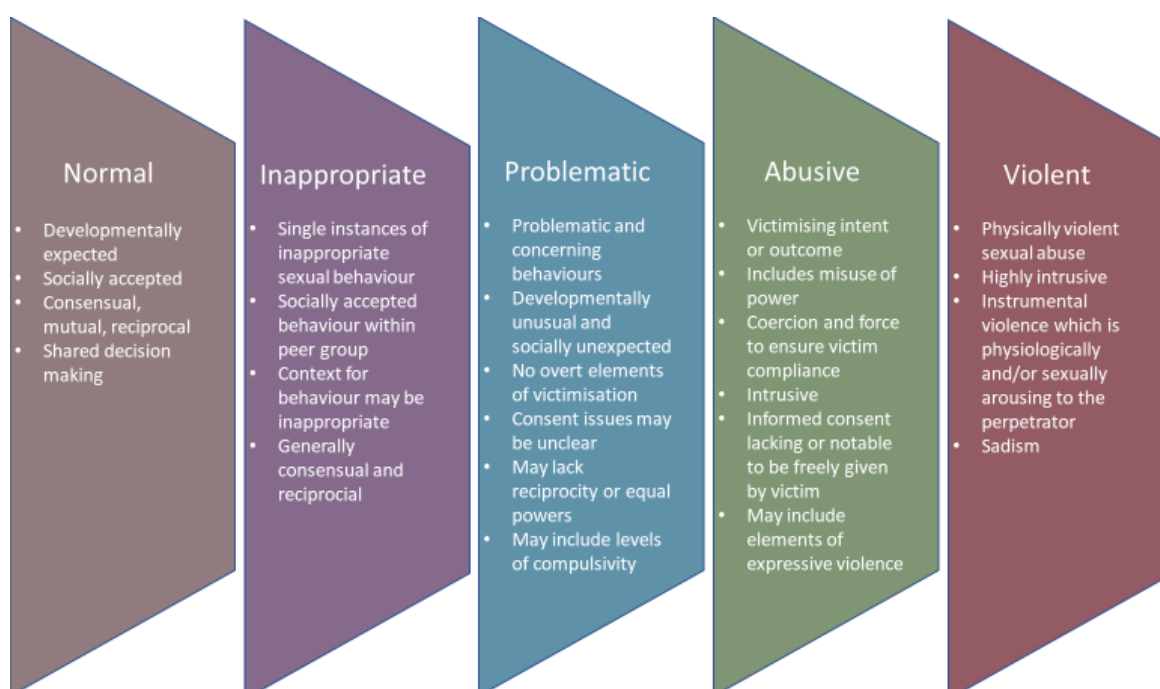


Figure 1: continuum of sexual behaviour in childhood (Hackett 2010)

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly, [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), UN/GA/44/25, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> S. Hackett, [Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours](#), Research in practice, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> S. Hackett, [Children, Young People and Sexual Violence, Children Behaving Badly? Exploring peer violence between children and young people](#), In Barter, C. & Berridge, D. (eds), Blackwell Wiley, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.13.

## 2. Scope of the issue

Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an **increase in the level of awareness** of the issue of children who display HSB, as studies revealed that a significant proportion of sexual violence against children was committed by children.<sup>5</sup>

For example, in the UK, children and young people account for approximately a quarter of convictions against victims of all ages.<sup>6</sup> The UK ChildLine delivered 3878 counselling sessions about peer sexual abuse in 2017-2018, an increase from 2013-2014 where they received 2750 calls from children about harmful sexual behaviour towards another child.<sup>7</sup> In a French statistical study, it was shown that almost 1 out of 10 (8%) perpetrators of sexual violence were under 13 years old, and that 20% were between 13 and 17 years old in 2018.<sup>8</sup> In a Georgian study, the majority of reported sexual abuse related to young people as the perpetrators.<sup>9</sup> A study in Germany, it was indicated that over a quarter of alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse were younger than 21 years old in 2003.<sup>10</sup> In Sweden, 10% of all individuals suspected of sexual offences in 2000 were between 15 and 17 years old.<sup>11</sup> In Norway in 2013, 156 children between 13 and 17 years old were charged with one or more sexual offences.<sup>12</sup>

It is probable that these figures underrepresent the reality of the prevalence of sexual abuse inflicted by children. Moreover, research on the prevalence of this issue is lacking in many Council of Europe member states. It is likely that HSB displayed by children is a considerable social problem across all member states.

## II – Relevant international and regional standards

### *UNCRC*

Article 19 - 1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to **protect the child** from all forms of physical or mental violence [...] including **sexual abuse**, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for **other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up** of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

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<sup>5</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> S. Hackett, [Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours](#), Research in practice, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> C. Dyer (dir.), [The Expert Group on Preventing Sexual Offending Involving Children and Young People – Prevention of and Responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviour by Children and Young People](#), Scottish Government, 2020, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Interstats, [Insécurité et délinquance in 2018 : premier bilan statistique – Fiche #3 Violence sexuelles](#), French Ministry of Interior, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> M. A. Lynch et al, [National Study on Violence against Children in Georgia \(2007-2008\)](#), UNICEF Georgia, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> A. Heiliger, [Täterprävention bei sexuellem Missbrauch und sexueller Gewalt unter Kindern und Jugendlichen](#), Deutsche Jugend, no 9, 2005, p.381-390.

<sup>11</sup> C. Kjellgren et al, [Adolescent sexual offenders: A total survey of referrals to social services in Sweden and subgroup characteristics](#), Sexual Abuse 18, 2006, p.357-372.

<sup>12</sup> M. Sandvik et al, [The Voices of Young Sexual Offenders in Norway: A Qualitative Study](#), Open Journal of Social Sciences 5(2), 2017, p.82-95.

Article 24 - 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to the **enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health** and to facilities for the **treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health**. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services. [...]

Article 37 - States Parties shall ensure that: [...]

(b) No child shall be **deprived of his or her liberty** unlawfully or arbitrarily. The arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law and shall be used only as a **measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time**; [...]

Article 40 - 1. States Parties recognize the right of every child alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law to be treated in a manner consistent with the promotion of the child's sense of dignity and worth, which **reinforces the child's respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others** and which takes into account the child's age and the desirability of **promoting the child's reintegration** and the child's assuming a constructive role in society. [...]

3. States Parties shall seek to promote the establishment of laws, procedures, authorities and institutions specifically applicable to children alleged as, accused of, or recognized as having infringed the penal law, and, in particular: [...]

(b) Whenever appropriate and desirable, measures for dealing with such children **without resorting to judicial proceedings**, providing that human rights and legal safeguards are fully respected.

4. A variety of dispositions, such as **care, guidance and supervision orders; counselling; probation; foster care; education and vocational training programmes and other alternatives to institutional care** shall be available to ensure that children are dealt with in a manner appropriate to their well-being and proportionate both to their circumstances and the offence.

*UNCRC General comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system*<sup>13</sup>

9. [...] Research has demonstrated that intensive family- and community-based **treatment programmes designed to make positive changes in aspects of the various social systems** (home, school, community, peer relations) that contribute to the **serious behavioural difficulties** of children **reduce the risk of children coming into child justice systems**. [...]

108. Specialized services such as probation, counselling or supervision should be established together with specialized facilities, for example day treatment centres and, where necessary, small-scale facilities for residential **care and treatment of children referred by the child justice system**. Effective inter-agency coordination of the activities of all these specialized units, services and facilities should be continuously promoted.

109. In addition, **individual assessments of children and a multidisciplinary approach** are encouraged. Particular attention should be paid to specialized **community-based** services for children who are below the age of criminal responsibility, but who are assessed to be in need of support.

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<sup>13</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General comment No. 24 \(2019\) on children's rights in the child justice system](#), CRC/C/GC/24, 2019.

*UN CRC General Comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence*<sup>14</sup>

Footnote 17: In the context of “sanctions”, the term “perpetrators” excludes children who harm themselves. **The treatment of children who harm other children must be educational and therapeutic.**

52. [...] **Services and treatment for perpetrators of violence, especially child perpetrators, are also needed.** Children who are aggressive towards other children have often been deprived of a caring family and community environment. They must be **regarded as victims** of their child-rearing conditions, which imbue them with frustration, hatred and aggression. **Educational measures must have priority and be directed to improve their pro-social attitudes, competencies and behaviours.** Simultaneously, the life conditions of these children must be examined in order to promote their care and support and that of other children in the family and neighbourhood. [...]

*Explanatory report to the Lanzarote Convention*<sup>15</sup>

116. Moreover, the negotiators acknowledged that in certain circumstances where minors commit offences (such as, for example, where they produce child pornography among themselves and for their own private use but subsequently distribute those images or make them available on the Internet), there may be **more appropriate methods of dealing with them** and that **criminal prosecution should be a last resort.**

*Lanzarote Committee Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children*<sup>16</sup>

7. Children should only be **criminally prosecuted** for conduct related to “child pornography” as a **last resort** and priority should be given, depending on the circumstances, to **more appropriate methods** of dealing with their harmful behaviour (e.g. educational measures, therapeutic assistance) [...]

### **III – Types of HSB and characteristics of children**

#### **1. Types of HSB displayed by children**

According to research conducted by Professor Simon Hackett, the majority of cases of HSB currently coming to the attention of professionals are for “abusive” and “violent” behaviour (58%). 20% of cases were assessed as falling into the “problematic” category, and 16% into the “normal” or “inappropriate” category.<sup>17</sup> A professional from an Icelandic treatment centre informed the VAE Group that 38% of HSB cases referred to them were low risk, 52% were medium risk, and 10% were

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<sup>14</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, [General comment No. 13 \(2011\) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence](#), CRC/C/GC/13, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Council of Europe, [Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#), 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Lanzarote Committee, [Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children](#), Council of Europe, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.15-17.



high risk.<sup>18</sup> A professional from a UK treatment centre stated that the most common cause for referral of children with HSB to the centre was sexual touching (35%).<sup>19</sup>

There is **limited empirical research on children with lower level problematic sexual behaviour**.<sup>20</sup> The proportion of children displaying low-risk HSB is therefore difficult to estimate.

In recent years, there has also been a significant increase in **online harmful sexual behaviour** with the emergence and mainstreaming of information and communication technologies. Children account for an estimated of one in three internet users worldwide,<sup>21</sup> and internet is now an important tool in children's lives. As much as this creates opportunities for children, it can also **generate risks** for children, including of violence, exploitation and abuse.

The online environment is now a platform where children increasingly **explore and express their sexuality**, for example by generating and sharing sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos of themselves (practice known as "sexting"). However, this practice can also put children at risk of harm.<sup>22</sup> The **prevalence of online HSB** is evidenced in Professor Simon Hackett's study, where he found that 18% of cases of HSB took place solely online.<sup>23</sup> About 25% of referrals to the UK treatment centre "Be Safe" are for sexually inappropriate media use.<sup>24</sup> Research from the Project DeSHAME (involving Denmark, Hungary and the UK) shows that 6% of children aged 13-17 have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year, 41% witnessed that happening, 25% witnessed young people secretly taking sexual images of someone and sharing them online and 10% admitted to having done it in the last year, and almost 9% reported being sent sexual threats online.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Characteristics of children displaying HSB and victims

Research shows that the majority of children reported as displaying HSB are **male**, while the majority of children at the receiving end of another child's HSB are female. However, the proportion of **female** children displaying HSB appears to be growing (19% according to "Be Safe" treatment centre,<sup>26</sup> 5% according to a treatment centre in Iceland).<sup>27</sup>

Children displaying HSB come from a wide range of **different age groups**. HSB can appear at a very early age (in Iceland, a child as young as 4 years old was referred for treatment for HSB).<sup>28</sup> Peak time for the development of harmful sexual behaviour appears to be early adolescence (12-14 years old), while sexual offences committed by minors against other appears to peak in mid to late adolescence (14-17 years old).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [Presentation](#) by Anna Kristín Newton.

<sup>19</sup> [Presentation](#) by Stephen Barry.

<sup>20</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF, [The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World](#), 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Lanzarote Committee, [Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children](#), Council of Europe, 2019, preamble.

<sup>23</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> [Presentation](#) by Stephen Barry.

<sup>25</sup> Childnet, Kek Vonal, Save the Children Denmark, UCLan, [Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment: A cross-country report from Project deSHAME](#), Project deSHAME, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> [Presentation](#) by Stephen Barry.

<sup>27</sup> [Presentation](#) by Anna Kristín Newton.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> D. Finkelhor et al, [Children's Exposure to Violence: A Comprehensive National Survey](#), *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*, 2009.



Surveys have also revealed that many children displaying HSB have **special needs**, mostly Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, learning difficulties, autism or anger management issues. In fact, a study conducted by Professor Simon Hackett showed that 38% of children with HSB were children with an intellectual disability,<sup>30</sup> and a professional from an Icelandic treatment centre for children with HSB reported to the VAE Group that 70% of the children they received for treatment had a form of disability.<sup>31</sup>

In most cases of harmful sexual behaviour by children, the **victim knows the perpetrator**. For example, in 83% of cases referred to the treatment centre “Be Safe” in the UK, the victim was known to the child displaying HSB. Sexual harmful behaviour can also occur within the family environment. A professional from “Be Safe” informed the VAE Group that sexual experiences between siblings was the most common form of intrafamilial sexual abuse, higher than parental sexual abuse. However, research on sexual experiences between siblings is very limited.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in a research performed in Norway, it was found that most children convicted of sexual offences against other children and who admitted their offence described the act as consensual and mutual.<sup>33</sup> This highlights that children displaying HSB are not necessarily aware that what they are doing is wrong and that their behaviour is harmful to the other child.

### **III – Responses to harmful sexual behaviour by children**

In accordance with the international and regional standards aforementioned, children who display HSB should only be prosecuted and held criminally liable as a measure of last resort. States are encouraged to develop alternative methods of addressing this issue, such as providing psychological support and therapeutic treatment to children with HSB. A wide range of interventions are needed, with cooperation from multiple sectors, in order to prevent the occurrence of displays of HSB, identify its early signs, assess and treat children with HSB.

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<sup>30</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.23.

<sup>31</sup> [Presentation](#) by Anna Kristín Newton.

<sup>32</sup> [Presentation](#) by Stephen Barry.

<sup>33</sup> M. Sandvik et al, [The Voices of Young Offenders in Norway: A Qualitative Study](#), Open Journal of Social Sciences 5(2), 2017, p.82-95.

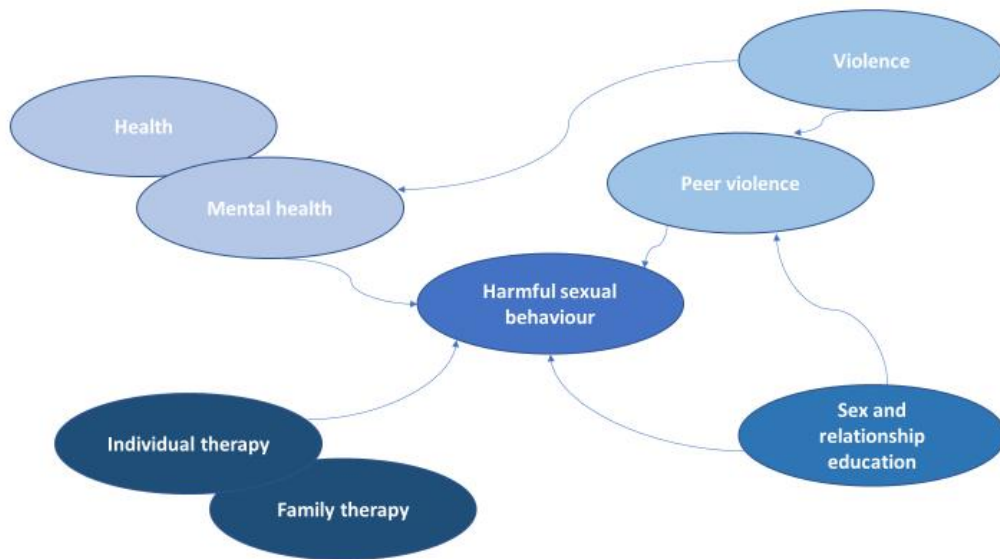


Figure 2: overview of harmful sexual behaviour in a wider context (Children’s Rights Division of the Council of Europe 2020)

#### Responses at the Council of Europe level

At the Council of Europe level, the following actions have been taken to address the issue of harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children:

- The **Lanzarote Committee** delivered an Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children in 2019, which contains recommendations on how states should respond to the increase in child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children.<sup>34</sup>
- The **Lanzarote Committee** is carrying out its 2<sup>nd</sup> monitoring round on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies, including challenges raised by child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children.<sup>35</sup>
- The **Working Group on responses to violence against children** (CDENF-GT-VAE), under supervision of the CDENF, is currently exploring the need and opportunity for specific guidance and tools related to children who display harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Lanzarote Committee, [Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children](#), Council of Europe, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/2nd-monitoring-round>

<sup>36</sup> See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/cdenf-gt-vae>

### *Responses at the national level (Council of Europe member states)*

Children who display harmful sexual behaviour is a taboo topic, with limited available research. Therefore, not all member states have developed a specific response to this issue. [The Annex I](#) of this paper provides a non-exhaustive list of some initiatives developed in member states to tackle and address the issue of harmful sexual behaviour.

The main initiatives developed by states are listed hereafter:

- **Provision of psychological help and therapeutic support.** Therapy can be provided to an individual child displaying HSB, as well as his/her family. This helps children understand their problematic behaviour, and learn social skills and norms about what is or is not acceptable behaviour. Family therapy will also assist and support the family in overcoming this issue, which is especially challenging and difficult when the child with HSB and the child victim are related. Examples of this type of intervention can be found in Belgium ([SOS Enfants ULB, Equipe Groupados](#)), Germany ([Just Dreaming of Them](#)), Iceland ([Psychological services provided by the Government Agency for Child Protection](#)), and the UK ([Be Safe](#)).
- **School interventions.** Some states have established school-based programmes to provide sexual and relationship education to children, to prevent violence among children and adolescents. Examples of such programmes can be found in Italy ([Telefono Azzurro](#)), Spain ([Dat-e Adolescence](#)), and the UK ([Be Safe](#)).
- **Child helplines.** Through anonymous helplines, children can seek advice and support on any issues they may face. Many states have child helplines, such as France ([Service National d'Accueil Téléphonique de l'Enfance en Danger](#)) Italy ([Telefono Azzurro](#)), Ukraine ([La Strada-Ukraine](#)), and UK & Ireland ([Stop it now!](#)).
- **Diversion.** Diversion allows states to tackle criminal behaviour displayed by children, without children going through formal criminal judicial proceedings leading them to having a criminal record. For example, the Netherlands ([Stitching Halt](#)) and the UK ([Be Safe](#)) offer such diversion programmes.
- **Tools to respond to HSB.** Tools have been developed, mostly by the UK, to address HSB displayed by children. These tools can offer guidance on the development of multi-agency responses to HSB ([NSPCC](#)), guidance to support children ([Supporting young people with harmful sexual behaviour online: A guide for educators to employ a contextual and multi-agency approach](#)), or insight in recognising the signs of HSB ([Traffic light tool](#)).
- **Statutory guidance.** The UK has introduced a [statutory guidance](#) for schools and colleges on keeping children safe in education. One of its focuses is on “child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment”.
- **National reports.** National reports provide a comprehensive overview of the issue and prevalence of HSB in a specific country. [Norway](#) and [Scotland](#) have conducted reports on the prevention of HSB.

## **IV – Recommendations**

In order to address the issue of harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children, and prevent its occurrence, a number of additional actions could be taken by states.

Based on Professor Simon Hackett's research, there should be an increase in prevention of HSB. Such prevention can be made at three different levels:<sup>37</sup>

- **Primary prevention:** community or population wide initiatives.
  - There needs to be wide **awareness raising** on the issue of HSB within the population. Harmful sexual behaviour of a majority of children is not reflective of an individual pathology, but of problematic or abusive cultural norms. In that case, individual treatment of a child may not be the answer, and engaging with the child's environment may better address his/her harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>38</sup> This appears in line with research conducted in Norway, where children who committed sexual offences later shared that they did not know that their actions were criminal offences at the time of the offence.<sup>39</sup>
  - **Sex and relationship education, and child sexual abuse education**, should be delivered to children in order to teach them about appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. In a research conducted in Norway, children who got in contact with the justice system because of HSB stated that education on sexuality and sexual assault would be a good preventive factor of HSB.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, studies have identified lack or inappropriate sexual knowledge and sex education as a feature of children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>41</sup>
- **Secondary prevention:** interventions prior to abuse with higher risk, aimed at targeting at-risk groups and offering early interventions.
  - There is a lack of data and comprehensive research in Council of Europe member states on the prevalence of the issue. There is a **lack of evidence-based treatment for addressing HSB displayed by children, especially regarding low-risk behaviour**. Policy and practice responses are in a wide majority focused on higher risk behaviour. Developing a response to low-risk behaviour would enable adequate response to such behaviour, and prevent over-treatment of children.
  - There is a lack of understanding of HSB, and as result insufficient knowledge on adequate ways to respond to children displaying such behaviour. Research shows that many teachers do not possess the knowledge and never received training on this issue.<sup>42</sup> **Parents, carers and professionals working directly with children should receive information and training** on harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children. This would help identify early signs of HSB, and prevent its occurrence and escalation.

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<sup>37</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.35-47.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>39</sup> M. Sandvik et al, [The Voices of Young Offenders in Norway: A Qualitative Study](#), Open Journal of Social Sciences 5(2), 2017, p.82-95.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> S. Hackett, [Sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children: Nature, causes, consequences and responses](#), Council of Europe, 2020, p.31.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g. K. Draugedalen, [Teachers' responses to harmful sexual behaviour in primary school – findings from a digital survey among primary school teachers](#), Journal of Sexual Aggression, 2020.

- **Tertiary prevention:** support in situations where children have sexually abused other children to reduce the likelihood of recurrence. This can include assessment, safety planning and therapeutic interventions.
  - Approaches must be chosen on a case-by-case basis, according to **the specific child**, his/her specific risks, needs, developmental stage and experiences.
  - Interventions should be **holistic**, and engage with the child's environment, i.e. parents, carers and families, as well as the child who displayed HSB.
  - **Rehabilitative approaches** should be preferred, to support and promote the development of the child's competences and healthy relationships. **Community-based and welfare oriented responses** are preferable, and would help ensure the child's reintegration in society.

In light of the evidence gathered through different sources, the following measures seem to be crucial in addressing HSB displayed by children:

- Increasing the **awareness** of the issue of HSB within the wider community;
- Promoting **comprehensive sex and relationship education** in schools, including on limits to respect, child sexual abuse etc., and considering the recommendations coming from children themselves;
- Stepping up and promoting **research** on the issue of HSB to encourage the development of adequate, evidence-based and non-judicial responses, in particular to low-risk behaviour;
- Increasing the **awareness and training of parents, caregivers and professionals** working directly with children on HSB to detect and respond to early signs of HSB;
- Promoting and developing **holistic treatments and interventions**, which are adapted to the individual child and engage with his/her environment;
- Promoting **rehabilitative interventions** to HSB, which do not lead to or involve the child's criminal prosecution.

**Proposals of actions to be undertaken by the Working Group on responses to violence against children (CDENF-GT-VAE) on responses to harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children:**

- ✓ **Review of legislation, policy and practice concerning the responses provided to harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children, by the Working Group on responses to violence against children (CDENF-GT-VAE), through a survey prepared by the Secretariat;**
- ✓ **Preparation of a report to be adopted in October 2021 based on the aforementioned review.**

## Annex I

### Initiatives aimed at children with harmful sexual behaviour Examples identified in selected Council of Europe member states

<b>Country</b>	<b>Type of initiative</b>	<b>Name of initiative</b>
<b>Austria</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Rat auf Draht</a>
<b>Belgium</b>	Evaluation and assessment of the child, psychological help and support	<a href="#">SOS-Enfants ULB</a> <a href="#">Équipe Groupados</a>
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Plavi Telefon</a>
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	Youth programme (training, sexuality education, services and counselling); combats harmful gender norms and helps change discriminatory or harmful behaviours towards women	<a href="#">Association for Sexual and Reproductive Health XY</a>
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Animus Associaion – 116 111</a>
<b>Cyprus</b>	Child helpline and training in schools	<a href="#">Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family</a>
<b>Czech Republic</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Linka Bezpeci – 116 111</a>
<b>Denmark</b>	Workshops (e.g. on digital wellbeing) and child helpline	<a href="#">Børns Vilkår</a>
<b>Estonia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Lasteabi – 116 111</a>
<b>Finland</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Child and Youth Phone - 116 111</a>
<b>France</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Service National d'Accueil Téléphonique de l'Enfance en Danger (119)</a>
<b>Georgia</b>	Training (e.g. on how to protect themselves from violence or on how to cope with peer pressure), consultations and child helpline	<a href="#">Public Health Foundation of Georgia</a>

<b>Germany</b>	Therapy organised by the Institute of Sexology and Sexual Medicine, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin	<a href="#">Just dreaming of them</a>
<b>Germany</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Nummer gegen Kummer - 116 111</a>
<b>Greece</b>	Children’s House (personalised mental health services for children including children with mental health, adjustment or behavioural problems), child helpline, school interventions.	<a href="#">Το Χαμόγελο του Παιδιού</a>
<b>Hungary</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Kék Vonal</a>
<b>Iceland</b>	Psychological services provided by the Government Agency for Child Protection	<a href="#">Psychological services for children due to inappropriate sexual behaviour</a>
<b>Italy</b>	Helpline, educational programmes in schools, study and implementation of methodologies and good practices to prevent, reduce and fight [...] any kind of youth problems	<a href="#">Telefono Azzurro</a> 19696 Listening and Counselling Helpline; School-education projects
<b>Latvia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Child and Adolescent Helpline – 116 111</a>
<b>Liechtenstein</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">147 sote</a> - 147
<b>Lithuania</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Vaiku Linija</a> – 116 111
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Kanner- Jugendtelefon</a> - 116 111
<b>Malta</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">SOS helpline</a>
<b>Moldova</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Telefon Copilului</a>



<b>North Macedonia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">SOS Helpline for Children and Youth</a> - 0800 122 22
<b>Netherlands</b>	Foundation: Halt has the legal task to tackle criminal behaviour among young people, without the young person getting a criminal record. It is not specific to harmful sexual behaviour, but to children in conflict with the law in general.	<a href="#">Stitching Halt</a>
<b>Netherlands</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">De Kindertelefoon</a>
<b>Norway</b>	Report - survey	<a href="#">Norwegian treatment services for children exposed to violence or sexual abuse, children using violence and child with harmful sexual behavior</a>
<b>Norway</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Alarmtelefonen for barn og unge</a>
<b>Poland</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">116 111</a>
<b>Portugal</b>	Child helpline and social and psychological interventions	<a href="#">SOS Criança</a>
<b>Romania</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Telefonul Copilului - 116 111</a>
<b>Russia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Telefon Doveria</a>
<b>Scotland</b>	Expert Group report Commissioned by the Scottish Government	<a href="#">The Expert Group on Preventing Sexual Offending Involving Children and Young People – Prevention of and Responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviour by Children and Young People</a>
<b>Serbia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">NADEL - 116 111</a>

<b>Slovakia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Linka detskej Istoty - 116 111</a>
<b>Slovenia</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">TOM Telefon - 116 111</a>
<b>Spain</b>	School-based prevention program for the reduction of dating aggression and victimization and bullying in adolescents	<a href="#">Dat-e Adolescence</a>
<b>Spain</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Fundación ANAR</a>
<b>Sweden</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">BRIS - 116 111</a>
<b>Switzerland</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Bertung + Hilfe - 147</a>
<b>Turkey</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Gençlik Destek Hattı</a>
<b>Ukraine</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">National children's hotline by La Strada-Ukraine, 116111</a>
<b>UK</b>	Interagency approaches to breaking the cycles of sexual abuse – working with children who have harmed sexually, their families and support networks	<a href="#">Be Safe</a>
<b>UK</b>	Evidence-informed tool for developing coordinated, multi-agency local responses to children and young people's harmful sexual behaviour	<a href="#">Harmful sexual behaviour framework – An evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours by NSPCC</a>
<b>UK</b>	Guidelines – recommendations on how to address the issue of sexual harmful behaviour	<a href="#">National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline – Harmful Sexual behaviour among children and young people</a>

<b>UK</b>	Statutory guidance for schools and colleges	<a href="#">UK government, Keeping children safe in education – Statutory guidance for schools and colleges</a> (Part five: child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment)
<b>UK</b>	Findings and recommendations on the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviour, strengths of responses, disclosure, peer support, parental engagement, disability	<a href="#">Beyond referrals – Harmful sexual behaviour in schools: a briefing on the findings, implications and resources for schools and multi-agency partners</a>
<b>UK</b>	Template peer-on-peer abuse policy	<a href="#">Peer-on-peer abuse toolkit</a> by FARRER&Co
<b>UK</b>	Guide for educators to employ a contextual and multi-agency approach to support young people with harmful sexual behaviour online	<a href="#">Supporting young people with harmful sexual behaviour online</a> by Childnet International
<b>UK &amp; Ireland</b>	Child helpline	<a href="#">Stop it now! UK &amp; Ireland</a>
<b>UK &amp; Ireland</b>	Harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit for parents, carers and professionals	<a href="#">The Lucy Faithfull Foundation – Harmful sexual behaviour prevention toolkit</a>
<b>UK &amp; Ireland</b>	Traffic light tool leaflet for parents and carers (to recognise signs of HSB)	<a href="#">Parents Protect! – Helping you understand the sexual development of children (under the age of 5 and 5-11 years old)</a>

## **Annex II: Further resources**

### **Council of Europe**

Commissioner for Human Rights, [Human Rights Comment: Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#), 2020.

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C. Dyer (dir.), [The Expert Group on Preventing Sexual Offending Involving Children and Young People – Prevention of and Responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviour by Children and Young People](#), Scottish Government, 2020.

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- C. Kjellgren et al, [Adolescent sexual offenders: A total survey of referrals to social services in Sweden and subgroup characteristics](#), Sexual Abuse 18, 2006.
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- L. J. White, [Thesis: Developing interventions for young females who display harmful sexual behaviours: a literature review of interventions and an exploration of what practitioners envision and understand](#), Newcastle University, 2018.
- M. Balfe et al, [The disrupted sociologies of young people with harmful sexual behaviours](#), Journal of Sexual Aggression 25(2), 2019.
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