# Using AIM education guidelines to understand and manage sexual behaviour.

**Have you had concerns about children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour? Carol Caron, head of safeguarding for Leeds and freelance consultant, introduces guidelines addressing these issues that she authored with help from Education Leeds NaSS.**

Practice experience indicates that dealing with children and young people with sexually problematic or harmful behaviours within school settings is a substantial problem for education staff. This includes not only managing the pupil posing the risk but also their victims, as well as protecting the rest of the school population and dealing with pressure from parents and governors. The AIM project (Assessment, Intervention, Moving on) has produced education guidelines that provide information from research and practice to support education professionals in understanding and appropriately managing pupils with sexual behaviour problems within education settings.

### Defining healthy, problematic and harmful

More than any other type of behaviour, sexual behaviours provoke very personal responses in professionals. The responses are shaped by personal, cultural, faith, community and societal values and can lead to under- or over-reactions. To understand the behaviour and be able to define potential and actual risk, it is important to ensure that decision making is based on research and practice knowledge. Having an agreed language to communicate within school and externally to other education services and other agencies supports good analysis and decision making. The guidelines describe a continuum of concern from 'healthy', to 'problematic' and finally 'harmful.'



| Healthy | | Problematic | | Harmful |

*More than any other type of behaviour, sexual behaviours provoke very personal responses in professionals*
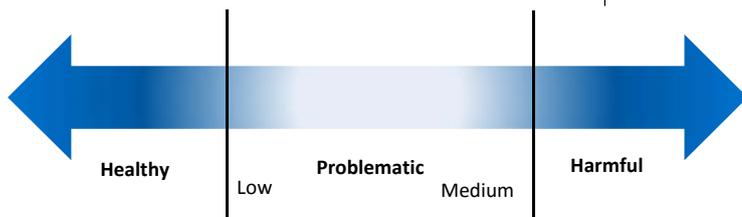
*Healthy* sexual behaviours have characteristics of mutuality with the pupils involved having free choice to engage or disengage. It is about exploratory behaviour as part of their normal development. There should be no indicators of intent to cause harm, and neither pupil would have more power or control in the situation than the other.

*Problematic* sexual behaviours indicate that there is a need for intervention. At the 'problematic low' part of the continuum above this may be as simple as a clear directive that the behaviour is unacceptable, setting boundaries and providing information and education. At the 'problematic medium' part of the continuum, the behaviour is more concerning because there are a number of aspects that

require intervention and therefore a more detailed multi-agency plan is required.

Examples of problematic behaviours would be one-off incidents, unless it is a serious sexual assault or rape. Usually it indicates that the behaviour is not typical for that pupil, and that monitoring shows they have not repeated the behaviour. This also includes behaviours such as touching over clothing - for example, grabbing breasts or bums. This may be an indicator of early stage sexual behaviour problems; key factors would be frequency and motive. However, many of these behaviours are influenced by peer pressure and are spontaneous rather than compulsive.

Other factors that moderate the level of concern are that the pupil is able to show insight into and take responsibility for their behaviour, and that other people targeted are not traumatised by the incident or controlled by the pupil.

*Harmful* sexual behaviours have elements of threats, force, coercion, planning and secrecy. There are clear power differentials and this is evident in the impact on the victim, who may be traumatised. There are also high levels of anger, denial and blaming others. The behaviour may be compulsive and disproportionate to other aspects of their lives, and increasing frequency or seriousness of incidents would also be of concern.

**Understanding behaviours – information from research and practice**

*Younger children*

The younger the child with more serious sexual behaviours, the more likely it is that they have been sexually abused or live in highly sexualised environments - i.e. there are few boundaries around privacy, intimacy and adult sexual activity in front of children.

If they have been sexually abused, their bodies may have strong sexual feelings which they cannot comprehend. These sexual feelings are often cross-wired with other negative emotions such as distress, feeling unsafe, angry etc. Therefore if the child is feeling distress it may trigger them to feel sexual, and vice versa. Children try to discharge the feelings in the only ways they know, which is the learned behaviour. If the child lives in a highly sexualised environments, the adult sexual activity may have overwhelmed their ability to

understand it leaving confusion, anxiety and tension in relation to sex and learned ways of dealing with these feelings through sexual behaviour. Emotional anxiety from unstable or unpredictable environment is often a factor if the environment is also highly sexualised, particularly where sex is paired with violence or as an exchange commodity for money or affection.

*Adolescents*
Not all adolescents with sexual behaviour problems have been sexually abused. As with the younger, they may have grown up in a highly sexualised environment. Another factor is puberty with its strong hormonal surges, which may exacerbate other problems such as social isolation or lack of communication and relationship skills.

Emotional abuse and problems with attachments are more prevalent - for instance, resulting from discontinuity of care and losses of significant attachment figures. This creates deficits in life and social skills, creating problems in making and sustaining meaningful relationships. Growing up in a violent household also has an impact, particularly on behaviours at the harmful end of the continuum.

Many also have significant family histories of abuse - i.e. parents have been abused and have poor coping mechanisms or resilience and/or there is a significant criminal activity of family members and a lack of pro-social adult models.

*Learning disabilities and the autistic spectrum*
Young people with learning difficulties are over-represented in the criminal statistics for a range of reasons: they may lack an understanding of the social rules; socialise with younger children; have more limited social networks overseen by adults; or are less sophisticated so more likely to get caught, and if caught they are more likely to say they did it so more likely to get a caution or a conviction.

Pupils with emotional and behaviours difficulties may display other extreme behaviours as well as sexual, including cruelty to animals, fire setting, poor communication skills and lack of impulse control.

Our understanding of young people with Asperger's or autism is growing. For those with Asperger's, understanding the complex social rules around dating and sexual relationships can be a minefield. For those further on the autism spectrum, issues around hyper- and hyposensitivity and sexual activity can create problems if they cannot stand to be touched (hyper) or conversely (hypo) if they need several different stimuli to achieve orgasm.

**Checklists and pattern mapping**
The AIM guidelines provide separate checklists for younger children, adolescents, those with learning disabilities and guidance for those on the autistic spectrum (the box below gives an example of the checklist for younger children). The checklists are based on research and practice and provide a guide for professional decision making on the level of concern - where are they on the continuum from healthy to harmful sexual behaviour - and a way of facilitating

*The ethos of the school is important in terms of how staff model pro-social behaviours, whether the staff and pupils feel safe, and whether concerns raised will be taken seriously*

discussions within school and between schools and families, and schools and other agencies (particularly social cues).

The outcome of this brief assessment is to have an informed perspective of the behaviour and to give a beginning point to the work. It is only a snapshot in time: pattern mapping methodology takes the snapshot and drills down further to begin to understand the pupil's behaviour in order to target resources to support and protect the pupil of concern, the victim/s and the other pupils in the school.

It compares two timelines - one of significant life events and another of the pupil's sexual behaviours. This visual tool helps to identify causal factors and patterns to the behaviour - for example, who is targeted, their gender age and vulnerability, where the behaviour occurs and how the pupil manipulates their victim. It also looks at patterns such as frequency and level of seriousness. Gaps in behaviour may indicate times when the behaviour is under control, and it helps to understand who or what is important to the behaviour being managed. It seeks to identify the meaning of the behaviour to the pupil, such as what they get out of it - to gain control, to make an emotional connection, or to release frustration or anger. If this is understood the pupil can be helped to find more pro-social ways to manage these feelings. It also looks at motivation to engage in work on the behaviour. The more motivated the pupil is the greater the likelihood of change.

**Managing behaviours**

*Whole school and specific issues*
The ethos of the school is important in terms of how the staff model pro-social behaviours, whether the staff and pupils feel safe, and whether concerns raised will be taken seriously.

Guidance on this behaviour should be integrated into the school policies on child protection, behaviour, bullying, etc. For example, the bullying policy could state that the pupils have the right not to be bullied physically, psychologically or sexually. This simple statement gives permission for those who feel sexually bullied to seek help, and clear guidance to those who would seek to sexually bully others that it will not be tolerated.

Preventative work can be done through identifying the 'hotspots' in school where physical, verbal or sexual bullying can take place. Reducing or monitoring these hotspots means fewer incidents are likely, or that these areas of the school are restricted for the pupil causing the risk.

Within the AIM guidelines there is information on a number of specific issues that have been raised by education staff in relation to managing sexual behaviour problems: how to talk to parents about concerns that their child has sexual behaviour problems, what sorts of words to use, cultural issues, dealing with parental feelings and following child protection procedures if appropriate.

Other specific issues are around stages of

## Checklist for understanding children under 12 years old

| | ← Healthy | Problematic | Harmful → |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Type of sexual behaviour** | Age appropriate, mutual and exploratory. | Not age appropriate, some sexual language of self-masturbation as the only form of comfort and regulation of arousal. | Adult sexual activity - intercourse, oral sex etc.<br>Extreme self-masturbation causing pain or injury. |
| **2. Context of behaviour** | Open, light hearted, spontaneous. | No secrecy or force or intent to cause harm but children involved seem uncomfortable. Masturbation is in public or becoming more noticeable. | Behaviour is planned, secretive; there are elements of threat, force and coercion. Masturbation, which involves high levels of intense emotions for the child such as anger, sexual arousal or insecurity. |
| **3. Child's emotional response when challenged about their behaviour** | Happy, embarrassed, able to take responsibility for their behaviour and its effect on others (dependent on age and understanding). | Child is ashamed, may initially struggle to take responsibility for their behaviours but can demonstrate remorse and empathy. | Child is angry, fearful, aggressive, distressed or conversely, passive, lacking in understanding of why anyone would be worried.<br>Cannot take responsibility for their behaviour, blames others and does not show empathy. |
| **4. Response of other children/ adults targeted** | Engaging freely, happy. | Uncomfortable, unhappy with behaviour but not fearful or anxious.<br>If behaviour directed at adults they feel uncomfortable. | Unhappy, fearful, anxious, distressed.<br>Could be physically hurt.<br>Could be trying to avoid other child. |
| **5. Power dynamics** | Similar age and ability, would normally play together. There are no factors to suggest a power imbalance. | Children would not normally play together or there may be some subtle factors or dynamics which suggest one child is more in control than the other. | Children would no normally play together or there are clear power differences due to age, size, status, ability, strength etc. |
| **6. Frequency of the behaviour** | Behaviour is age appropriate, ad hoc and not the main focus for the child. The child is interested in other things. | Some inappropriate sexual behaviour for age, however the child also has interest in other things; behaviour is intermittent but may be increasing in frequency. | Frequent incidents and the child seem focused on behaviour, from which they seem to seek comfort/reassurance or control.<br>It is disproportionate to other aspects of their life. |
| **7. Persistence of the behaviour** | Behaviour is age appropriate, ad hoc and not the main focus for the child. The child is interested in other things. | Behaviour is reoccurring and there are some difficulties in distracting and redirecting behaviour. However, the child is responsive to some intervention. | The child cannot be distracted from the behaviour easily, and returns to the behaviour.<br>Focus on the behaviour is disproportionate to other aspects of their life.<br>It appears to be compulsive and the main way they seek comfort/attention and control. |
| **8. Parental reaction** | Accepting of the concern and supportive of the child. | Parents/ carers struggling with accepting the behaviour, seeking alternative explanations. | Denial, minimisation of behaviour.<br>Blaming of the victim, threatening victim and family.<br>Rejecting the child.<br>Punishing the child harshly. |

managing risk, how to work with parents of the victim and other pupils, and particularly managing pressure that they may put on the headteacher or governors. There is also information on exclusions, work experience, transitions and cyber abuse.

**Safety and support plans**

The safety and support plans provide a framework for school which can increase confidence that all key areas have been considered, as well as improve communications with anxious or angry parents once concerns are raised. The plans cover how to:
a) support the individual/s targeted
b) support and manage the pupil who is posing the risk
c) protect the rest of the school population
d) manage parents' and governors' concerns.

**Suggestions for exercise and resources**

The manual concludes with resources and exercise ideas differentiated to key stage levels for individual work with pupil posing the risk that are appropriate within an education setting. The areas that usually need to be addressed are:
a) emotional literacy- the language of feelings
b) self esteem
c) communication skills
d) relationship and social skills
e) problem solving and decision making skills
f) functional coping mechanisms - anger management, relaxation techniques and assertiveness skills.

For more information, visit www.aimproject.org.uk/. The AIM guidelines manual can be ordered through the AIM project. Contact Julie Henniker, aimproject@msn.com or AIM Project, PO Box 778, Stockport SK4 9QQ.

# Helen: a case study

**Follow this case study through with colleagues and discuss the question it raises. How would you deal with the situation as it unfolds?**

Helen* is 16, and came out as a lesbian when she reached her 16th birthday three months ago. School staff were a bit worried that Helen might be bullied. However, her friends were very supportive and stayed close.

A learning mentor reported to the a DSP that she had seen Helen hanging around with one of the Year 7 girls and that she was concerned that the younger girl had developed a crush. The DSP made a record and asked the learning mentor to report back if she thought it was anything more serious.

The younger girl is 12, quite mature for her ages in respect of both physical and psychological development, but nevertheless there is a four year gap between her and Helen. Helen had reached the age of consent, but if the relationship between the two was to become sexual Helen would be committing an offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

*Should the school intervene at this point?*

This is a difficult question! It may be that nothing further will develop between the two and as yet there is no real evidence that the relationship is anything more than friendship.
The school decided to carry on monitoring the situation.

Two weeks later Helen's, best friend, Joy* spoke to the learning mentor. Joy has been friends with Helen for years but lately Helen has been spending more and more time with the younger girl. Joy is pleased for Helen to have come out as a lesbian; she had told Joy some time before telling anybody else. Joy says she cannot understand why Helen is hanging around with the younger girl and is worried that Helen will get into trouble. Joy had confront Helen with her concerns and Helen had become very defensive, saying she thought Joy would understand that she was only trying to help the younger girl because she had told Helen that she too only likes girls.

Two days ago Joy had come across Helen and the girl, and Helen appeared to be pushing the girl away from an embrace. Helen had not seen Joy coming and when Joy had told Helen what she had seen Helen had said, 'Oh she just gets stupid sometimes.'

Joy says that she doesn't know how to help Helen, and is concerned that the situation is getting out of hand.

*Should the school now intervene?*

The learning mentor assures Joy that she has done the right thing in relaying what happened, and explains that she needs to speak to the DSP. Joy is worried that Helen will get into trouble and will blame her. Joy was assured that while Helen needed to be spoken to, it was as much for her protection as for the protection of the younger girl.

*What would you do next?*

It was agreed that the learning mentor should speak to Helen, and that Joy would not be mentioned as the situation was already being monitored by staff.

Helen looked shocked when the learning mentor told her the concerns. She broke down in tears and explained that it had started because she felt sorry for the younger girl, who had sought her out because she had heard about Helen being a lesbian. Helen admitted she had been quite flattered by this but understood the law, and while she liked the girl and had wanted to help she had never considered her a potential girlfriend. Helen had been really shocked the other day when the girl had tried to kiss her and she had had to push her off. Helen's explanation added up of what Joy reported.

It was decided that the learning mentor would help Helen tell the girl that while she liked her, she did not want a relationship with her. The learning mentor would meet the girl to offer support and a place to share her worries about growing up, and would also speak to the girl's mother to let her know about her daughter's 'crush' and how the school was going to support her.

*Names and specific details have been changed