

CHILD PROTECTION
UPDATE 2015

Module 3
Identifying and
responding to sexual
behaviours in
students



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Slide 1

Facilitator notes

Allow 45 minutes for this session.

Prepare handouts:

- Scenarios
 - 1 copy per participant
 - Different scenarios for primary and secondary schools
- Case study
 - 1 copy per participant
 - Different case study for primary and secondary schools
 - Suggested responses are provided with these facilitator/s notes

- Traffic lights handout
 - 1 copy per participant (pages 5 and 6)
 - If possible, print on A3 paper (double-sided).

Throughout this module, the term 'parent' should be read to be inclusive of carers.

Session outline

This session includes information on:

- identifying problematic sexual behaviours
- responding appropriately to:
 - children and young people who demonstrate sexualised, as well as, problematic sexual behaviours
 - the safety, welfare and wellbeing of other children and young people
- staff responsibilities to follow up child protection concerns.

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Slide 2

Facilitator notes

Staff working with children and young people are required to have up to date knowledge and skills to identify and respond to child protection concerns according to their roles.

This session deals with a sensitive and controversial issue in schools and in the community. Some staff members may feel less comfortable than others in discussing children and young people's sexual behaviour.

It is suggested that agreement be made about how the sexual parts of the body and sexual behaviours, are to be referred to, during the session: whether the genitals are referred to as 'private parts' of the body, or by the correct anatomical terms. In discussing sexual behaviour, facilitators should moderate the language used according to the sensitivities of staff.

The content of the session may raise strong emotions and bring issues or experiences of staff members to the surface. The facilitator should remind participants that, if the presentation raises issues, a staff member can discretely leave the room or speak to you after the session. In some circumstances services could be accessed if the staff member feels distressed or should they wish to discuss personal experiences – such as the Employee Assistance Program, private counsellors or a general practitioner.

Any sexualised behaviour between students at school must be responded to, including:

- sexual play
- unwanted kissing
- touching in a sexual manner
- communication of graphic sexual matters
- oral sexual contact or making another student perform such acts
- exposing oneself or looking at another student's genitals.

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Facilitator notes

In any school it is not uncommon for teachers to observe sexualised behaviours between students or have these behaviours reported to them.

Even if both students seem to be complicit in the sexualised behaviour, they are close in age and there seems to be an equal power balance, it must be considered that one or both students could see themselves as a victim of sexual abuse.

This may not be realised until later, when feelings of victimisation can surface. It may also arise out of parents' response to the incident, or when feelings of shame or guilt subside.

Therefore, if you become aware of sexualised behaviour between students, it should not be dismissed lightly as consensual, experimental, play or a trivial incident. It is also important that the first response to sexualised behaviour between students is a child protection response, not a disciplinary response.

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The principal must be informed if:

- you learn about sexual abuse, or have concerns about sexual contact involving a child or young person
- you are concerned about a child or young person's sexual behaviour toward others
- you are concerned that a child or young person is at risk of sexual abuse
- a child or young person's behaviour, including sexualised behaviour, makes you worry that they may have been a victim of sexual abuse.

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Facilitator notes

These four categories of potentially concerning sexual behaviours, are taken from the Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG).

They must be taken seriously, conveyed to the principal and a decision made about their seriousness.

The professional judgement of the principal, of other staff with expertise in child protection issues and the MRG can assist in making a decision about appropriate action to take – which may or may not be a report to Family and Community Services.

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The MRG has 20 decision trees. The ones most relevant to this area are the *Problematic sexual behaviour towards others* and the *Sexual abuse* trees.

Problematic sexual behaviour is:

Sexual activity instigated by a child or young person, who is more powerful than the other child or young person in ways which include:

- a substantial difference in age, ability and/or development
- use of coercion, bribery, aggression and/or clandestine behaviour.

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Slide 5

Facilitator notes

There are clear signs that indicate when the sexual behaviour of a child or young person could be harmful or abusive.

One sign is an imbalance of power of the child or young person initiating the activity through being:

- older (by two or more years)
- taller, heavier or having a clear physical advantage
- more mature or emotionally sophisticated
- more intellectually advanced or persuasive.

This may be more pronounced where the child or young person who is the victim has a physical disability or a developmental delay that makes them vulnerable.

Another sign is when the behaviour continues even after it has been adequately addressed with the child or young person. (For some it may need to be raised a few times before behaviour change can be expected.)

Problematic sexual behaviour is:

- sexual behaviour that is abnormal for age or development and is compulsive and excessive
- a range of behaviours that may require:
 - intervention and monitoring by the school
 - specialist support
 - specialist interventions
 - criminal charges and prosecution.

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Facilitator notes

It can be challenging to identify what is normal sexual behaviour and what is problematic sexual behaviour.

Over-reacting to normal sexual play can have a negative impact on children. However, ignoring or minimising sexual behaviours may place children and young people at further risk of harm.

It is recommended that staff discuss any sexual behaviour observed by a student or between students in the school with a more experienced colleague; their supervisor or the principal so appropriate follow up is implemented. The principal may discuss concerns with the Child Wellbeing Unit or the local health service.

The types of behaviours that are generally considered normal and abnormal at various age and developmental levels will be explored later in this session

Why is intervention important?

Problematic and sexualised behaviour can be:

- harmful to other children or young people
- harmful to the child or young person engaging in sexualised behaviour because of:
 - increased risk of being abused themselves
 - disruption to developmental life stages
 - stigmatisation or identity issues
 - child protection issues may be unresolved
 - risk of the behaviour escalating and continuing into adolescence and adulthood.

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Facilitator notes

Explore what each of these points mean.

Ask participants to discuss the meaning of each point, which could include:

- Children and young people with sexualised and with problematic sexual behaviour need to be monitored and restricted to the extent needed to keep other children and young people safe.

However, the facilitator should stress that they are entitled to as much **normality** in their school program, and as much access to the activities they would otherwise be involved in, as possible.

- Not intervening puts the child or young person with sexualised behaviours at risk of further harm as, as well as being alienated from their circle of friends and peers, they may be targeted by abusive adults.
- Labelling the student e.g. referring to them as 'weird' or a 'sex offender' can impact on how a child or young person develops their identity, and can limit their potential to engage in healthy and positive behaviours.
- The behaviour may have been learned by being exposed to inappropriate sexual boundaries and a home environment that puts them at risk. They may be experiencing sexual abuse.
- Labelling the student may limit the possibility of early intervention, their access to therapeutic support and the likelihood of them 'growing out' of the behaviour.

Slide 7

Some statistics

- Over the 3 month period from October – December 2013, Family and Community Services received **406 reports** from NSW public schools where 'Child inappropriate sexual behaviour' was the primary reported issue for risk of significant harm report.

Community Services [Quarterly Report to Partner Agencies – October to December 2013](#)

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NSW public schools are the largest group of reporters of 'Child inappropriate sexual behaviour'. This is partly due to staff having extended contact with students and having a good knowledge of age appropriate child development.

During this time period, NSW Police made 122 reports, NSW Health made 129 reports, Family and Community Services (FACS) agencies, such as Housing and Ageing and Disability, made 144 reports, non-government organisations made 181 reports and other mandatory reporters made 50 reports.

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Why do children and young people engage in problematic sexual behaviour?

- there is no single reason or cause for this behaviour but there is a high correlation with a history of trauma and abuse
- between 35 to 50% have been sexually abused
- a similar proportion have experienced physical or emotional abuse or neglect or have witnessed parental violence

Children with problem sexual behaviours and their families, Human Services, Victoria 2011. 9

Facilitator notes

There is no single explanation for this behaviour and each child and their family needs to be considered in their unique context.

As well as a correlation with sexual abuse, clinical data indicates a child or young person with problem sexual behaviour is likely to have experienced:

- childhood trauma
- adverse socio-economic conditions
- homelessness or unstable home life
- intellectual disability or developmental delays
- social isolation and/or difficulties with school peers
- exposure to drug or alcohol misuse.

Children and young people in out of home care may be more likely to have experienced an unstable home life, abuse, neglect or family violence. They may demonstrate sexualised or problematic sexualised behaviour and need additional support in this area.

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Recognising problematic sexual behaviour

Activity – read the scenarios and discuss:

- Is this normal behaviour?
- Is this something I should be worried about?
- Should this be reported?

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Facilitator notes – allow 5 minutes for this activity

Hand out the scenarios. Divide into two (or more) smaller groups, each group working on one scenario. Allow 4 minutes for discussion. Nominate a scribe to take notes for each question as the scenario will be revisited later in this session.

Acknowledge that the scenarios don't contain enough information to make a definitive decision. This may often be the situation in real life and a decision needs to be made on the basis of the information available.

As well as deciding whether a report should be made to Family and Community Services, the principal could contact the Child Wellbeing Unit.

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Responding to sexual behaviours

When deciding how to respond...

- identify and consider the behaviour
- explore the context of the behaviour.

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Slide 11

Facilitator notes

In deciding on a response, the following should be considered:

The behaviour:

- what exactly happened
- where the behaviour occurred- private (secret) or public space
- the age and developmental capability of the students
 - obvious differences in age, size, ability
 - differences in strength, popularity, self-image

The context:

- was this was a mutual game or were force or threats or coercion used
- what else has been happening in the child or young person's life and the child or young person's history
- the impact of the behaviour on the other child or young person – be aware that they may not show that they have been harmed by the behaviour, however this should not stop staff from taking the supportive action required.

If there is the need to clarify or gather more information about an incident involving sexual behaviours, a nominated staff member should talk to the students involved separately.

The Traffic Light Tool can assist in identifying what is normal and what is abusive sexual behaviour.

Traffic Lights framework

A guide to identify, understand and respond to sexual behaviours:

GREEN part of normal and healthy development

ORANGE cause for concern

RED indicates or causes harm

Family Planning Queensland 12



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Facilitator notes: Allow 10 minutes for this slide and activity
The Traffic Lights framework provides examples of behaviours to show the differences between healthy and unhealthy sexual development in various age ranges of children and young people's development. This framework helps us understand and identify the characteristics of normal, healthy sexual behaviours, and those that are concerning, problematic or harmful.

This framework is based on current knowledge and research, and should be used in conjunction with child protection policies, procedures and the MRG.

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Note: Use of this framework must not replace the use of the MRG.

Activity: Give out Traffic Lights handout

Ask participants to return to their scenario groupings and check where the behaviours of Cassie/ Kai/ Lily or Ben fall within the Traffic Lights framework and whether their response has changed.

Suggested responses:

Cassie – orange: persistent, public behaviour, in preference to other activities – need to monitor and provide extra support

Kai – orange: persistent sexual play which is intimidating – need to monitor and provide extra support

Lily – green: may be age appropriate, (as long as engaging in a one on one relationship with a known person of similar age – these factors may need to be sensitively checked)

Ben – red: sexual activity in exchange for money – report to the Helpline for both Ben and Rosie.

It should be noted that, for the green behaviours, it is usually the role of the family and specialist services to 'talk, explain and support' these behaviours – not necessarily the school.

Case study

What action do you take to:

1. protect and reassure the child or young person who has been harmed
2. respond to the child or young person who has harmed
3. manage the incident
4. support and protect other children or young people who may have been harmed
5. communicate with parents?

Mandatory reporter guide <http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/> 13



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Facilitator notes: Allow 10 minutes for this slide and activity

Participants can continue in their current groups, or the facilitator may take the opportunity to have people to change groups.

Hand out the case study. Allow 5 minutes for the groups to read it and discuss each question. At the end, call upon volunteers from each group to share their responses to the questions.

Primary school suggested responses:

1. Comfort and support the boy who was with Nico.
2. Nico's behaviour has an element of aggression and is 'red'. He should be spoken to about why his behaviour is unacceptable and future expectations. Although he should not be 'demonised' he should be separated from the other boy and unobtrusively monitored.
3. Use the MRG. Run the *Problematic sexual behaviour towards others* tree for Nico and the *Sexual abuse* tree for the other boy. The outcome for both is *Immediate report to Family and Community Services Child Protection Helpline*. Family and Community Services (FACS) will advise about informing both sets of parents and how much detail can be given to parents (particularly if FACS wish to interview them).
4. Double check with relevant teachers regarding similar incidents with other children. If there are concerns, the MRG should be applied for other students or a 'class of children or young people'. A plan for monitoring Nico, in the least obtrusive way but ensuring safety of other students, should be developed and implemented.
5. Parents of the other boy (and any other children who have been harmed) need to be informed of the incident/s (as advised by FACS) and the school's action. Nico's parents need to be informed about the situation (as advised) and how the school is managing and supporting Nico.

If there are any concerns that Nico's problematic sexual behaviour may be linked to sexual abuse, the MRG sexual abuse tree should be run for Nico.

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Case study

What action do you take to:

1. protect and reassure the child or young person who has been harmed
2. respond to the child or young person who has been harmed
3. manage the incident
4. support and protect other children or young people who may have been harmed
5. communicate with parents?

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Secondary school suggested responses:

1. Comfort and support Mira, take her to a quiet and safe space with a staff member she feels comfortable with, listen to her but do not ask questions.
2. Try and establish where Rob is, and ensure he is okay and safe. Do not ask questions.
3. Use the MRG, running both the *Sexual abuse* tree for Mira and the *Problematic sexual behaviour towards others* for Rob. The outcome for both trees is *Immediate report to Family and Community Services Child Protection Helpline*. Family and Community Services (FACS) will likely advise that the Joint Investigation Response Team (JIRT) will contact the school and advise on their follow up. FACS will advise on interviewing students and informing parents.
4. Staff move the other students to another area, calm, comfort and assure students that staff are taking appropriate action and there is no risk to other students. Staff check if any of the incident has been captured on mobile phones and, if so, inform JIRT.
5. Following FACS advice, the principal informs Mira's parents about the incident, giving factual information and explains the school's response and what they are doing to protect and support Mira. The principal also provides factual information to Rob's parents about the situation and what they are doing to support Rob.

The MRG outcome for sexual abuse for Mira is also *Immediate report to Family and Community Services*, both if Mira is 15 or under or if she is 16-17 years old. When using the MRG, consideration should also be given to whether other students (or a 'class of children or young people') are also at risk.

Depending on Rob's age and other factors, FACS may have alternatively advised the school to contact Police. Schools should then take the advice of Police regarding interviewing students and other follow up.

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Responding to the child or young person subjected to sexual behaviour

- show care
- listen
- reassure them
- do not punish them
- ensure safety, and appropriate follow up, at school
- if a report is made to Family and Community Services, follow the case worker's advice about follow up processes in the school.

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Facilitator notes

The Mandatory Reporter Guide *Sexual abuse* tree should be run for any student subjected to sexual behaviours at school – even if the sexualised behaviour did not seem to be serious or concerning.

Even if the child or young person was complicit to varying degrees or was breaking school rules at the time, the response must be one that will assist recovery. Punishment should be avoided. Only experts can judge the impact of being subjected to unwanted sexual contact, so we must assume a negative impact which could be further exacerbated.

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If a serious incident occurs staff need to support and reassure the child or young person harmed as well other children or young people who may have been witnesses to the incident. Do not bring children or young people together to compare stories. Students should be talked to separately. If FACS or Police are involved they will advise on this process.

Responding to the child or young person who has engaged in problematic sexual behaviour

- be mindful of your own response
- consider the age and development of the child or young person
- implement strategies to ensure the safety of other children or young people
- protect the child or young person from 'over reactions' within the broader school community.

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Facilitator notes

Staff need to monitor their emotional reactions and not make judgements or stigmatise the child or young person who has engaged in problematic sexual behaviour.

The needs of the child or young person who has engaged in the problematic sexual behaviour are of equal importance as the needs of the child or young person who has been harmed.

Very young children, children or young people with a learning disability may have limited understanding of the impact of their behaviour on others. Responses to them need to be clear, developmentally appropriate and delivered in a non-punitive manner.

FACS, JIRT or NSW Health can help guide staff in their response to a child or young person. NSW Health's local sexual assault services and community based sexual assault services may provide services to children under 10 with problematic sexual behaviours. New Street Adolescent Service (NSW Health) offers advice on children and young people over 10 years, who sexually abuse. They can be contacted by phone on (02) 9840 4088.

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The child or young person who has engaged in problematic sexual behaviour will be impacted by the follow up of the incident and the response of their peers and the wider community and will need support. Efforts should be made to support them and ensure, as much as possible, that information sharing is managed and they are treated 'normally' and with respect.

Key messages to parents of students directly involved

- allay fears
- give parents confidence that the school is managing the situation
- support parents to be attentive to their child's wellbeing
- support parents to manage their child's behaviour and to seek assistance if needed
- share information with the broader school community on a 'needs to know' basis.

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Facilitator notes

Each situation is different; however delaying communicating with parents may increase their fears and concerns.

Depending on the seriousness of the incident the school should be guided by FACS or Police on the amount of information that can be given to parents and the school community.

If neither FACS nor Police are involved, the process is the same as informing the broader school community of any other serious incident or event. Information should be positive, reassuring and limited to what is essential to know for the safety of their children, and to dispel any false information that may be circulating.

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Resources

Mandatory Reporter Guide

<http://www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au/>

[Traffic Lights guide to sexual behaviours in children and young people: identify, understand and respond](#) – Family Planning Queensland

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