BEYOND REFERRALS

Harmful sexual behaviour in schools: a briefing on the findings, implications and resources for schools and multi-agency partners

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Background

While schools are often places of safety and empowerment, young people report that they are also locations where they experience sexual harassment and violence. In 2017 Girlguiding's survey of girls aged 13-21 found that 64% had experienced sexual harassment in school.[1] A report by the National Education Union and UK Feminista in 2017 found that over a quarter of girls at mixed schools have experienced unwanted touching of a sexual nature at school.[2] In our 2019 study Beyond Referrals, students and educators reported to witness or experience a range of forms of harm occurring within schools including; rumours about sexual activity, sexual name calling, abusive relationships, online harassment, non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery, unwanted touching, and sexual assault and rape. While fortunately some of the forms of harm are rare, students suggested that "sexual harassment happens every day" and that sexual harm was 'normalised' within schools.[3] Such evidence has led young people, educators and policymakers to insist that greater steps need to be taken to protect young people in schools from sexual harm. In 2018 the Department for Education released advice on Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges.[4]

This briefing presents findings from a two-year study into harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in English schools, *Beyond Referrals Two*. It builds on an initial two-year study (2017-2019) into multi-agency enablers and barriers to addressing HSB in schools. The first study highlighted the need for schools to move beyond referrals to social care for young people affected by HSB and towards the development of whole-school and partnership responses which prevent further harm. These findings evidenced the need for contextual approaches to safeguarding, whereby responses to HSB and associated harm move beyond intervening with individual young people to understand and engage with contexts – peer groups and locations – associated with them. This approach argues that when sexual harm happens in schools, a focus on the individual young people involved is insufficient and must be accompanied by a recognition of the broader contexts that facilitate, and can prevent, harm occurring.

Self-assessment toolkit

The findings of Beyond Referrals formed the basis of a self-assessment toolkit including two 'traffic light tools' and a series of webinars to support schools and multi-agency partners to audit their response to HSB across four areas: the systems and structures in place, prevention, identification and response, and intervention into incidents of HSB. The resources are freely available [here].

The findings of this second study have been used to adapt and develop the self-assessment toolkit for schools, which now includes:

- A new and updated traffic light tool
- Guidance and examples on completing the self-assessment

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[1] Girlguiding. (2017). "Girls' attitudes survey." accessed 17 April 2020. https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2017.pdf.

[2] National Education Union (2017) "It's Just Everywhere." accessed 17 April 2020. https://ukfeminista.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Report-Its-just-everywhere.pdf.

[3] Firmin, C., et al. (2019). "Beyond referrals: levers for addressing harmful sexual behaviours between students at school in England." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education **32**(10): 1229-1249.

[4] Department for Education (2018) "Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges." accessed 17 April 2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-between-children-in-schools-and-colleges.

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- A range of self-assessment methods including parent and student surveys, student engagement sessions, policy review documents and resources for reviewing safeguarding logs.

The updated traffic light tool now includes a new 'cultural context' lever to help schools to understand the prevalence of HSB in their school, levels of peer support available and the extent to which harm may be normalised in their setting.

Methodology

This briefing provides an overview of findings from this second study. *Beyond Referrals Two* sought to:

- Pilot the self-assessment toolkit for schools by testing and implementing it with 16 schools across England.
- Expand understanding of the strengths and challenges schools have in addressing HSB and the resources, policy implications and interventions required to prevent harm.

The study recruited 16 schools across England to participate in the study across four multi-agency partnerships (referred to as sites W, X, Y and Z). Of these, 12 schools completed their own self-assessment audit and the research team at the University of Bedfordshire completed the assessment for the remaining four. A range of methods were employed including:

- 9 focus groups with young people
- 9 focus groups with staff
- 15 interviews with Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) and senior leadership
- Reviews of safeguarding and behaviour logs
- Observations of school environment
- 106 student surveys
- Parent surveys
- 10 interviews with schools completing self-assessment
- 2 interviews with multi-agency partners
- Analysis of 10 self-assessment audits

In total 160 students, 64 educators, two multi-agency professionals and 83 parents took part.

The study sought to engage with a range of education providers, all of which were secondary providers, including special schools[5] (n=5), boys' schools (n=1), secondary schools without a sixth form (n=5), a faith-based school (n=1), academy schools (n=2), a pupil referral unit (n=1), and a sixth form college (n=1). In this briefing, we use the word 'schools' to refer to all 16 settings.

The findings presented here draw from the primary fieldwork undertaken by the team and analysis of self-assessment audits.

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[5] Throughout the briefing the term special schools will be used. This was the term the schools participating in the research used to describe themselves.

Findings

This briefing provides an overview of key thematic findings from the study, organised in relation to: the prevalence of HSB; strengths of responses; disclosure; peer support; parental engagement; and disability. Further findings will be made available via the Contextual Safeguarding Network and published in academic papers.

Prevalence

This study did not seek to indicate exact prevalence rates of HSB occurring within schools. However data collected evidenced the following types of sexual harm happening between students in the schools that participated in the study:

- Sexist or homophobic name calling and bullying
- Sexual comments in person and on social media directed at students (such as 'slag', 'sket', 'hoe', 'bitch' and 'slut')
- Rumours about other students' sexual activity
- Rating students (predominantly directed at girls in relation to attractiveness, but also "*how much of a sket she is*" (Site Y, Focus Group, Student); and rating male students around masculinity/aggressive behaviour)
- Controlling behaviour in relationships, including pressure from partners to share social media passwords and to take down images they didn't like
- Pressure to send sexual photos by another student – predominantly aimed at girls
- Sexual imagery shared on social media without consent. When asked which social media platform images were shared on, 42% of students who said that sexual imagery was shared on social media without consent cited Snapchat and 27% cited Instagram. Other means by which students said students shared sexual images without consent included: pornhub, anonymous apps, the internet, USB sticks, and 'Bait outs' – online pages where students are invited to share sexual imagery, gossip and videos of other students)
- Inappropriate or unwanted touching or groping – predominantly touching of bums in school
- Pressure to perform sexual acts, particularly fellatio and masturbation
- Sexual bullying, harassment and pressure
- Self-harm (as a result of sexual pictures being shared with other students)

Overall, the research in focus groups and surveys indicated that, of the types of harm suggested above, the most prevalent forms of HSB between students were: sexual/sexist name calling (73% of students surveyed indicated this type of harm occurred in their school); rumours about students' sexual activity (55%); sexual harassment (36%); sexual images/videos of students shared without consent (30%); and unwanted touching (22%). The survey used within the special schools was an adapted visual version of the survey provided to the three other schools. Data from the special schools survey (n= 10) suggested less HSB happened between students in special schools than in the other settings surveyed.

In the four sites where the research team carried out audits, there were some variations in types of HSB occurring. For example, in mixed schools there seemed to be a greater prevalence of sexual name calling, unwanted touching, and pressure to send sexual images, with some indication that these were targeted predominantly at girls. In the all-boys school, it was evident that dominant masculinity played a role in the high prevalence of homophobic

bullying/name-calling and other types of HSB including sexually abusive language about female teachers and students' female family members. In the special school(s), there was greater prevalence of inappropriate touch/groping and public masturbation; although staff discussed the challenges of identifying behaviours that were harmful and those that were part of age-appropriate sexual development.

Where harmful sexual behaviour happens

In addition to prevalence, the research identified some locations where HSB was more likely to occur in schools. Overall, students stated that sexual harm between students often happened in places that were unsupervised. "*When a teacher is near-by no one says anything, but when they're away then it happens*" (Site X, Survey, Student). According to survey data, the most frequent locations identified by students as places where sexual harm happens in school were in the toilets (33% of students indicated this in the survey), on the playground (22%) and in classrooms (19%). Generally, students also noted HSB occurring in parks when walking home; on social media; and in crowded or busy areas such as corridors where "*you're more unaware of who's doing it because it's so packed*" (Site Y, Focus Group, Student). Staff in special schools also suggested that areas during outdoor play such as *"little dens, outdoor classroom … mature bushes"* (Site Z, Interview, DSL) were hotspots for harm when unsupervised. The survey disseminated in the special schools asked students to specify whether "other boys and girls try to touch you" in various locations. Of the 10 students surveyed and a possible four categories provided (toilets, playground, classroom, and taxi); two responses suggested that unwanted touching takes place in the toilets and in the taxi.

While students recounted numerous incidents of HSB occurring in schools, this was not necessarily evidenced within behaviour and safeguarding logs. Students frequently stated that staff were unaware of the full extent of HSB, while staff also noted that they felt they did not have a true picture of HSB.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may support schools to identify and build an understanding of prevalence of HSB in schools. Furthermore, the new audit toolkit provides a lever on identifying prevalence to support schools in this activity.

Recommendations for schools:

1. Schools should engage students in small group sessions to discuss different forms of HSB, and how often different forms of sexual harm take place. Schools may also want to engage students in hotspot mapping exercises to identify where HSB may be occurring. Guidance for student engagement can be found here.
2. Schools should review safeguarding and behaviour logs to identify if incidents recorded correlate with those identified by students. Guidance on how to review behaviour logs can be found here.

Strengths

Across the audits schools overwhelmingly scored highest on the 'structures and systems' lever which assessed the systems in place to respond to HSB. In particular, schools scored highly in relation to the staffing capacity related to safeguarding within the school; the referral pathways for raising HSB concerns internally; and the structures through which the school can engage with, and understand, the local context which affects students.

Many of the subcategories assessed in the structures and systems lever are in accordance with statutory guidance governing school safeguarding procedures.[6] Given this, it is to be expected that schools would score highly within this category.

The DSL role

Of the participating schools, the majority had an individual staff member with a fully protected safeguarding role. A fully protected safeguarding role was assessed to be a DSL, or a member of the DSL team, whose role had a sole focus on safeguarding rather than responsibility for safeguarding alongside other curriculum duties, such as teaching. This protected time allowed the DSL to support, supervise and train school staff on safeguarding concerns and procedures, map trends and concerns relating to HSB in the school and the wider community and attend multi-agency meetings within the wider safeguarding partnership. This enabled schools to provide a consistent response to HSB, which was integrated within wider safeguarding structures, aligned to the wider local multi-agency partnership response, and which considered the school's response in the context of current and emerging concerns related to HSB. It also provided schools with an opportunity to develop staff knowledge on HSB and related issues and build capacity in identifying harm, managing disclosures and supporting students.

In schools that had a fully protected safeguarding role, staff recognised the benefits this increased capacity had to support them around safeguarding concerns.

Although there are financial and resourcing implications to creating fully protected safeguarding roles in schools, having at least one member of the safeguarding team's role completely protected is a crucial factor in enabling an effective, comprehensive and consistent response to HSB.

There was also evidence that DSLs and DSL teams benefited from regular safeguarding meetings (daily or weekly), supervision and support from external agencies:

> *We [DSL team] meet once a week as a three and talk through cases and we share, we bounce that off each other and that's something we manage. But we also do attend [external agency] sessions termly and we do buy [external agency] in if we feel there is a need to pick the phone up and ring [external agency].* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

> *As a Safeguarding team we actually meet every day at seven thirty, we have a meeting every morning where we discuss the real hotbeds of concerns... That's gold dust for us.* (Site X, Focus Group, SLT)

While the research highlighted benefits of adequately staffed and resourced DSL provision, a number of additional elements were identified which facilitated this role, for example, opportunities being made available for DSLs and safeguarding staff to discuss cases and voice concerns and access to advice and guidance where required from the multi-agency partnership.

Referral pathways

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[6] Department for Education. (2019). "Keeping children safe in education statutory guidance for schools and colleges". London, UK: Crown Copyright. Department for Education. (2018). "Working together to safeguard children. London". UK: DfE.

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Twelve schools demonstrated clear referral pathways which were available to, and used by, staff to refer incidents of HSB. The majority of schools used computer software systems to refer and monitor incidents and flag concerns and trends occurring in the school. Across schools, staff reported feeling confident in using internal referral systems to refer concerns. Students in these schools also had clear knowledge of the systems and were able to explain the process for referral used by staff:

> **Researcher: Say a student told a teacher in the school [about a HSB incident], what do you think the school would do?...**
> Student: CPOMS[7]
> **Researcher: Do you want to tell me what CPOMS is?**
> Student: It's like they're sat on the CPOMS.
> Student: Because like if I tell you something private and personal, it's dangerous. If you put it on CPOMS you can send it on to another person who can do something about it. (Site Z, Focus Group, Students)

The referral structures provided pathways for students to disclose concerns to staff, and for staff to refer these concerns on to colleagues within and external to schools. The success of school referral systems was informed by local partner agency safeguarding policies and national statutory guidance. Having clear referral pathways provided staff with structures through which to offer consistent and effective responses to students affected by HSB. The usability and accessibility of these structures to staff and students promoted a welfare led approach to responding to HSB and enabled students to make informed disclosures about concerns related to HSB. Many staff reported that computerised referral systems enabled them to refer incidents quickly and easily and to keep informed of progress and actions taken around cases. Computerised systems also allowed for the clear tracking and recording of cases. Staff noted that using a key flag for HSB would make this even easier.

Engagement in local context

School professionals' understanding and awareness of current and emerging issues affecting students locally supported the schools' response to HSB. Across participating schools there was evidence that the schools identified, and used, pathways to engage in the local context in a range of ways. For example, DSLs participated in multi-agency meetings where HSB or related issues, such as child sexual exploitation or serious youth violence, were discussed. Schools were also part of wider school networks where they could come together and support each other on particular themes related to HSB and associated concerns, or to co-create or share relevant resources. School networks were considered to be particularly valuable to special schools, who used these forums to adapt and develop resources or to support school transitions for their pupils. These structures supported schools to situate their response to HSB within wider local concerns and in line with preventative activities and interventions occurring in the local area.

Physical environment

Schools also scored highly on their consideration of the physical environment of the school in relation to HSB. Across the schools there was evidence of interventions within physical spaces as harm-prevention measures. For example, two schools assessed by the research team had open toilets and one had a lunchtime rota system to separate particular students during the lunch break. There were also examples of staff supervision being increased in areas where incidents occurred. In one school both staff and students discussed how incidents of HSB were particularly prevalent at the end of the school day in the space immediately outside the

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[7] A computer safeguarding software system used in schools.

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school. As part of the school's response to these incidents, the school extended staff supervision to this area at the end of the day. This increased supervision was noted and welcomed by students participating in the research, who reflected that this space now felt safer. There was also evidence of schools proactively thinking about creating safe spaces for pupils, for example one school had a therapeutic room where students could go to access support and discuss any concerns.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may support schools to improve the structures and systems in place to respond to HSB and to understand how the physical environment of the school in relation to HSB.

Recommendations for schools:

3. Schools should consider having at least one member of the safeguarding team with a completely protected DSL role.
4. Schools should provide support for DSLs and create opportunities for staff in safeguarding roles to discuss cases and access advice.
5. Staff require clear referral structures and systems to raise concerns of HSB. These need to be available to all staff. These processes need to be understood and utilised by both staff and students, and any barriers to doing so need to be identified and alleviated.
6. Schools should develop pathways to engage in the local context, for example by attendance at multi-agency meetings and connecting to school networks. This should be facilitated and co-ordinated by the multi-agency partnership.

Disclosure

Successful identification of HSB requires schools to provide multiple safe options for young people to disclose and, most importantly, for these to be perceived as safe and used by students. Findings suggest that schools may provide a range of options for disclosure, for example, trusted adults (tutors, counsellors, mentors and pastoral leads), physical places to disclose (counsellors' officers, private rooms) and anonymous routes for reporting, but that there are significant barriers to the use of these by students. Students reported that in most cases they were unlikely to report instances of HSB to school staff. Only 22% of students from four schools who completed the survey reported that they would tell a teacher if they were concerned about sexual harm in school. Instead the majority would disclose to a friend (49%) or parent (50%).

When students were asked if they would report HSB if it happened to them or a friend, they reported a range of barriers to disclosure. Many of these barriers were specific to individual school contexts whereas other were relevant across schools, particularly:

- Lack of discretion by staff and concerns that teachers share details with other staff
- Concerns of overreaction by staff
- Fear of ruining a relationship with a teacher or being perceived differently
- Fear of being labelled a 'snitch' by other students
- Predicted inaction and lack of sufficient response by staff
- Students and teachers not recognising it as harmful
- Concern about parents being informed
- Assumption that the school doesn't know what happens between students

- Fear of other students being made aware via gossip, school assemblies or of being pulled out of lessons in front of others
- Fear if getting in trouble – especially if it involved a perceived element of illegality for the victim e.g. underage sex or image taking
- Not wanting to increase the time they have to think about/discuss the incident
- Fear of contacting the police and police overreaction – turning up in uniform or marked cars
- Homophobia – concern they will be perceived as gay
- Feeling uncomfortable or awkward discussing personal experiences

This was not, however, the case for all students, and some across all schools reported factors which would support them to disclose including:

- Having a trusting and positive relationship with an individual staff member
- Previous positive experiences of school responses
- Teachers that show they respect students, listen and respond subtly
- Staff with a specialist role not linked to teaching or behaviour

Two central themes dominated discussions of disclosure: school responses and a culture of 'snitching' as discussed below.

School culture – 'snitching'

The most readily articulated barrier to disclosure across schools was a culture that viewed speaking out and disclosing, particularly to adults, as negative. Staff and students suggested the reason that a young person would not speak to a staff member if they or a friend experienced harm was because they were concerned about being labelled, or acting, as a 'snitch', 'grass' or 'snake'. In three of the four schools where the research team conducted the assessments, 'snitching' was given as a reason by young people and staff as why you wouldn't tell. The only school in which students did not refer to this culture was the special school, where students discussed the importance of telling an adult. Typically the following reason was given as to why a student may not disclose HSB:

> *Everyone could know and no one would actually speak up or go to an adult about it because they don't want to be known as a snitch*. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

> *I think the repercussions of possibly reporting that. There is just in all things that we do with bullying, with this [HSB], with other areas, there is the snitching kind of that, you know, it's embedded in the kind of teenage psyche if you like, that snitching is wrong. They felt that it was either not important enough or harming them or others enough to want to report it. And they felt that saying nothing made it go away, kind of for them, or for their friends. Probably just ignoring it.* (Site W, Interview, DSL)

While in many circumstances this reason was provided with very little explanation – suggesting that it was taken-for granted – there appears to be a number of factors which underline this barrier. Firstly, both students and staff suggested that, within many school cultures, disclosing harm was deemed worse than instigating sexual (or other forms) of harm.

> *They're more frightened of being labelled a snitch and the consequences to that, than they are about actually, they would be more frightened of their peer group isolating them, bullying them that being, say, sexually touched or, and people knowing about that. […] that's what kids were saying, that actually, I would rather put up with it [sexual harm] than everybody shunning me and being isolated. And that's really, really sad.* (Site X, Interview, DSL)

Even though you know it's not right and they shouldn't be doing that, you know the school is going to take it so much more serious than it should be. We've had people get permanently excluded and no one is going to say, "Ah, the boy did something wrong," the girl's going to be known as a snitch and exaggerator. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

As the DSL and student above suggest, transgressions of this unwritten but highly pervasive code were policed via a number of punishments – most significantly social isolation or stigmatisation via harassment and shaming.

Yet, student focus groups suggested that this did not apply to all forms of HSB or indeed all schools and students. Students discussed hierarchies of harm, in which some offences were deemed so harmful that students were more likely to disclose – as in the case of rape:

It depends if it was actually physical, like without clothes or get someone given head or something. If the girl felt like they were forced into it, I think they would speak up about it. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

While it is clear that for many the threshold to disclose was very high, there were variations across ages and schools. In a number of schools disclosure was more likely for younger children (11 and 12 year olds). Students were less likely to disclose as they got older, with disclosure rates becoming more likely again for some in sixth form.

Staff suggested that some students were more likely to disclose than others, despite a culture that dissuades disclosure, due to a number of factors such as being 'empowered', understanding that the behaviour is 'wrong', concern for a peer and, most significantly, trusting the adults within schools:

There are some people who would be put off because they might get called a snitch and there are some students who perhaps wouldn't, they would come straight to a member of staff as opposed to talking to their peers. But that's not a negative, it's just about us continuing to empower those students to have those conversations with [us], or if they felt that they could say, "That's not OK, I'm going to go and get a member of staff". (Site X, Interview, DSL)

Our school is divided into four smaller schools, so our pastoral system operates in those four smaller school areas. So they do know their students really well. I do think that one of the strengths is that our kids do come forward when they're concerned about another person. So if they're concerned, that they seem very off at the moment, they will come forward and they will give a little bit of detail around that because they would prioritise their peers' kind of mental well-being above the snitching. So they will come and they will do that. And so there is a level of trust that when a situation arises and it's a growing concern, there'll be a point at which they will divulge and then we can begin to unpick the underlying reasons for that. (Site W, Interview, DSL)

The fact that some students feel able to disclose while others do not suggests different factors are at play. Firstly, it is important for schools to consider how safe it actually is for a student to disclose harm. If any of the factors listed at the start of this chapter, such as lack of staff discretion, are true, it may mean that it isn't safe for students to tell. Furthermore, it is important to understand why some students may feel able to speak out more than others. Research suggests that fear of disclosure is often more prevalent within marginalised communities, often with a legitimate basis.[8] For example, students that have had negative experiences of

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[8] Allnock, D. and R. Atkinson (2019). "'Snitches get stitches': School-specific barriers to victim disclosure and peer reporting of sexual harm committed by young people in school contexts." Child abuse & neglect **89**: 7-17.

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disclosure previously and those with low trust of teachers are less likely to disclose. It is likely that within school, as within broader society, some students are more likely to be taken seriously, or have their concerns responded to adequately, than others.

The findings suggest that we can learn from schools where this was not the case. In particular, students in the special school suggested that they would tell a teacher and that they would "*Tell teachers you work with as they know you the best*" (Site Z, Focus Group, Student)*.* Again the importance of trusting relationships is key. And while special schools may differ significantly from other secondary schools – often in terms of staff-to-student ratios – it may be helpful to consider ways to replicate these relationships: for example, through ensuring students have pastoral support they speak to regularly.

School polices – zero tolerance

While many enablers and barriers to disclosure were universal to schools, discussions with students evidenced the context-specific nature of some barriers, which were closely linked to individual school policies and responses. One such being seemingly 'zero tolerance' approaches. Findings identified that in some schools, senior leadership endorsed a zero tolerance approach to sexual violence and harassment. This approach appeared to be rooted in a progressive move towards recognising and responding to sexual harm, and the need to send a message to staff and students that HSB was neither acceptable nor tolerated. In these schools, HSB appeared to be predominantly managed via the school's behaviour policy through the use of sanctions. However, while well-intentioned, the research evidenced a number of challenges with this approach.

Firstly, in practice zero tolerance was often interpreted to mean that any form of sexual harm would receive a sanctions-based response. In a number of schools this was managed via an exclusion of some form. The challenge of this approach is that while HSB falls across a continuum, zero tolerance can have the unintended consequence of responding to all forms of sexual harm in the same way.[9] This may provide clarity and simplify the decision-making processes for staff but it can also reduce their ability to use their own skills, understanding and judgement to consider the differing circumstances of harm.

Secondly, such approaches often de-contextualise and individualise incidents, so that sexual harm can be seen as a failure of individual students as opposed to symptomatic of wider harmful gendered cultures within schools which need responding to. Treating sexual harm as a purely behavioural issue, rather than one of safeguarding, can reduce the opportunity to protect children or learn about the contexts in which it occurs, and can fail to recognise the needs and vulnerabilities of those instigating harm. Research suggests that zero tolerance often does little to deter offenders and disproportionately affects students of colour and those with disabilities or safeguarding issues that are complex in nature.[10]

Thirdly, findings from this research suggest that zero tolerance or predominantly sanctions-based approaches can reduce disclosure rates. Students in this study highlighted that when they knew the school response would incur a sanction, the burden of decision-making was placed on them rather than staff:

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[9] Hackett, Simon. (2004)*. "What Works for Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours?"* Ilford: Barnardos.

[10] Martinez, S. (2009). "A System Gone Berserk: How Are Zero-Tolerance Policies Really Affecting Schools?" Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth **53**(3): 153-158.

It's about the way the school go about it, cos I feel like it's just about punishment and that's why it sort of scares you [to tell] because he'll get punished. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

In one school, the interventions offered, which were almost exclusively sanctions based, appeared to do little to deter behaviour but resulted in victims being punished:

The girl has to live with the fact that they've done that [told the school] and everyone knows that they've done that. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

The boy gets punished by the school but the girl gets punished even worse by the students. (Site Y, Focus Group, Student)

While it is important that schools send a message that HSB is not tolerated, the findings suggest that even in schools which promote zero tolerance, HSB is in fact tolerated to a certain degree. HSB is not always responded to, which normalises the harm. Staff responses may vary and where sanctions-based responses are used, instigators do not always receive support to change and understand their behaviour.

Instead of a 'zero tolerance' approaches the findings of this study point to the need for HSB policies to promote proportionate responses to behaviour. Schools need to contextualise behaviours and ask broader questions about individual responsibility and school cultures to identify what is underlying harmful behaviour.

The research suggests that while dissuasion of disclosure is often extremely powerful, the most significant barrier is how readily accepted this is by staff and students. However, it is clear that there are many factors which contribute to this. As such the findings suggest that schools need to proactively engage with students to understand what factors limit disclosure and how to tackle these.

Recommendations

The findings point to a number of recommendations.

Recommendations for schools:

7. Schools need to identify opportunities to engage students in small group sessions to discuss different forms of HSB, if, who and why they would disclose to and any barriers to this. Guidance can be found here.
8. If students discuss a culture of 'snitching' then schools need to address this through curriculum focussed on tackling this specific issue.
9. Schools need to consider if it is safe for students to disclose and if not how to address this.
10. Schools must ensure that there are clear responses to HSB in policy that students are aware of and that these are proportionate, flexible and contextual.
11. Schools should remind staff of the importance of clear communication and the need for confidential and discreet routes for disclosure.
12. Schools should avoid mass communication (such as assemblies) about HSB incidents or related issues and ask students the best ways to manage and respond to incidents.
13. When dealing with incidents of HSB, schools should consider the victim's wishes where possible and appropriate, including which parent to inform if necessary.
14. Schools need to reflect on, and train staff in addressing, unconscious bias.

Peer Support

It is clear that peers act both protectively and, sometimes, harmfully within schools. When asked who they would speak to if they experienced HSB, students consistently reported that they would tell a friend. Survey data showed that when asked "what things make you feel safe in your school", the most common answer selected (82%) was "my friends". On the other hand, when asked "what things stop you feeling safe at school", the most common/selected answer (32%) was "students are unkind to each other". All students who answered a survey from the special school answered "yes" to telling a friend if they felt unsafe. Survey data suggests that peers – in the form of friends – contribute to students' feeling safe.

Students in the majority of focus groups stated that if a student experienced HSB they would tell a friend before a parent or teacher. The reasons for this were multiple, including that friends are more likely to understand the context of adolescence, are less likely to overreact, would provide 'backup', are trustworthy and can offer advice:

> **Researcher: Can I ask why would you tell a friend? What can a friend do?**
> Student: Because like if you told your mum …
> Student: That would be awful.
> Student: You wouldn't because that would be so awkward and she'd be like, "So why did you do that?", but whereas if you told your friends, they'd be like, "Oh it's fine, don't worry about it", they'd understand more at your age.
> Student: If it escalated, they'd end up helping you and say if it all ended up in a fight, they'd end up backing you. (Site W, Focus Group, Students)

> **Researcher: Why would a student tell a mate?**
> Student: Probably because they think they can trust them.
> Student: If it's something serious, you don't go straight to a teacher, it's people you trust.
> **Researcher: If you go to your friend, what would you hope that they could give you?**
> Student: Advice (Site W, Focus Group, Students)

Despite the obvious importance of friendships and peer support for identifying and responding to HSB, few schools mentioned ways in which they encourage positive peer support – although one school did suggest this would be helpful:

> It would be useful to have resources to train some of those young people in some of the things to look out for and how to support those other students around the issues that we're talking about. (Site X, Interview, DSL)

Schools did not mention any formal peer mentoring programmes, nor did they discuss focussing on peer support within the Personal, Social, Health and Economic education or Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum. Therefore, despite evidence that across schools, students are likely to be receiving disclosures of HSB, there was no evidence to suggest that students were provided with support on how to manage these and respond. While students are clearly experts in providing support in the form of friendship there was evidence that, without support, they may also replicate harmful responses to HSB which may further stigmatise young people who have been harmed.

Prevalent across all schools was evidence of victim-blaming. Across focus groups students repeated the message that "*If you send a nude you have no one to blame but yourself*" (Site Y, Focus Group, Student) and "*they [victims] have to learn to say no*" (Site Y, Focus Group, Student). Additionally, it was clear across the majority of schools that student responses were

gendered in nature, whereby girls were often seen to be to blame for the harm they experienced:

> *Student: Our year isn't as bad [for HSB] as the older years so things will get sent around the older years.*
> **Researcher: Why do you think it's different between the years?**
> *Student: Because we don't have as many slags in our year.* (Site W, Focus Group, Female Student)

Negative retaliation

While friends provide an important avenue to support victims of HSB, and arguably, prevent students from instigating harm, it was clear that the wider student body could dissuade individuals from disclosure (as above) and act in violent or harmful ways in response to incidents. The research highlights that it is important for schools to recognise and respond to wider peer groups as well as those immediately affected by incidents of HSB:

> *With the most recent case we've had some group conversations with the victim and her friends because they weren't dealing with it very well. Depending on the need it would be normally very victim focused. I'm thinking about another instance where a male student was permanently excluded, and this was a few years back now, and his friends were very vocal about the fact that he had been excluded, and I thought we had made the wrong decision. The girl's friends also very vocal about the fact that we'd made the right decision. So for a couple of days there was quite a lot of unrest. Again, that's just picking them off, talking to them individually, and not sharing any details with them really but having those conversations.* (Site Y, Focus Group, Staff)

Both staff and students suggested that wider peer responses were often informed by the social status and popularity of a student. Therefore, even if a student was accused of instigating HSB, their popularity may provide a buffer from the effects of negative retaliation:

> *Student: It really depends who the boy is, say he's in like a big group and he's liked.*
> *Student: Nothing would be said.* (Site W, Focus Group, Students)

In most cases, managing negative peer responses was a particular challenge for schools. This was particularly difficult for cases involving police investigation. This challenge was augmented by a number of factors. Firstly, the length of time that police investigations take. While schools often have to respond immediately and manage repercussions within hours, police advice could be delayed by a number of days and investigations could take months or even years. Secondly, some schools felt the police did not offer enough robust guidance on how to manage repercussions in a way that reflects the reality of school life:

> *They don't help us with how to manage the repercussions or what we should do when it reaches the rest of the student body, and what they then choose to do because obviously we can't have every child that mentions it being arrested for witness intimidation. And what exactly is witness intimidation? How far are we allowed to speak to other parents in order to get them on board to help support?* (Site W, Focus Group, Staff)

However, while the majority of schools were aware of, and monitored for, some forms of negative peer behaviour, there was also evidence that schools could reward such behaviour in some circumstances. The following extract recounts the experience of a female student who had been raped by another student:

Staff: She was counselled up. Absolutely, we threw everything at her. […] She did experience an awful lot in the aftermath of that, I supported her quite directly and, sort of, one to one and I was her biggest advocate and I dealt with her every single day because she would come to me and say, "Everyone's getting at me," and all this, that and the other. It culminated in, unfortunately, her receiving an exclusion for having a fight with someone because they had just pushed her buttons too much over a six, seven-week period. […]
Staff: He was very popular.
Staff: He was very popular and is, I'm sure, lamented his loss. He's lamented by them even though they're all fully aware of why he's not here. (Site Y, Focus Group, Staff)

Such accounts highlight the challenges of rigid behaviour polices which contradict, and often take precedence over, safeguarding polices. In this circumstance, despite the teacher being aware of the level of threats and intimidation the student had experienced, and the trauma of the sexual assault, they felt they needed to act in line with the school's behaviour policy. In essence, the intimidation offered by the wider student body was rewarded. While it is important that schools operate with an attitude of fairness it may be that policies, and the sanctions used in accordance with these, prevent responses that recognise students' needs and instead reward those that seek to silence or dissuade disclosure. While we recognise the need to protect students, it is clear that incidents of this nature suggest gaps in policies whereby students who are in need of support are made more vulnerable and the wider student response – of targeting victims – is rewarded through the victim receiving a sanction.

Recommendations

The findings point to a number of recommendations.

Recommendations for schools:

15. Schools could consider peer mentoring programmes and how these could encourage disclosure to trusted young people in safe ways.
16. Schools could provide curriculum which supports young people to handle disclosure.
17. Schools could address victim blaming and particularly the gendered nature of this through the curriculum.
18. Schools could consider the use of peer group mapping following incidents to identify those immediately affected and their friends.
19. Behaviour policies should provide flexibility to account for the contexts of harm and vulnerability of students.

Recommendation for the police:

20. The police should have greater guidance so that they can provide realistic advice on managing repercussions and retaliation within school contexts, including witness intimidation.

Parents

Along with the support that peers can provide, the research evidenced the protective role parents play as valuable safeguarding partners in school responses. When asked who students would speak to if they were concerned about HSB, half of all students responding to the survey suggested that they would tell 'my parent'.

Parental awareness of sexual harm in schools

The findings suggest that there is a gap between parental awareness of sexual harm and students' experience of it. Survey data showed that 90% of parents said they were "confident" that "my child would tell me about these issues happening in school". However, while some students stated they would tell a parent if they were worried about sexual harm, the vast majority of parent responses to the survey (76% of parents who answered the survey) said that they are either not aware, or don't know, if sexual harm happens between students in the school; compared with over 45% of students saying that some form of sexual harm happens as frequently as "a few times a week" in their schools. This suggests there is some variation between parents' perceptions of what their child would tell them about, the prevalence of sexual harm in schools and what students actually tell their parents. If 90% of students did indeed tell their parents, we could expect that the number of parents unaware of sexual harm would be less.

At the same time, the vast majority of respondents (68% of parents completing the survey) stated that they "don't know" if the 'the school is good at involving parents when responding to sexual harm', suggesting that there may be a lack of engagement between the school and parents regarding sexual harm when it occurs. Of parents surveyed, 61% agreed that the "school is good at responding to sexual harm in school".

These two issues highlight a potential discrepancy between what students tell their parents and parental engagement from schools to address HSB. While some students would be willing to speak to a parent about such issues, most parents are unaware of what sexual harm happens and what the school response would be. This raises a number of questions around the potential barriers that exist in parental engagement with HSB in schools, especially when parents have shown a willingness to engage with schools regarding such issues (81% "think parents should be involved in working with the school to prevent sexual harm").

When parents were aware of sexual harm occurring, their understanding of the types of HSB happening correlated with those identified by students. Of the 24% of parents who stated that they were aware that sexual harm happens between students in school, the three most selected responses (rumours about other students' sexual activity, sexist name calling and sexual harassment) aligned with those that students selected as occurring most frequently in the student survey. This indicates that these parents have a good understanding of the harm that happens, whether that is informed through the school or their child.

Parents were also aware of some of the barriers students faced in disclosing harm. Of parents surveyed, 39% disagreed with the statement "I feel confident my child would tell a teacher or member of school staff if they were worried about themselves or a friend". Parents provided a range of reasons, including peer pressure, peer retaliation and concerns that they would not be believed or taken seriously when disclosing HSB:

> *I think that in the complex world of teenagers it is sometimes hard for them to alert teachers to dangerous activities (including sexual bullying), there is huge pressure from their peers not to "snitch". I only hope I have instilled in my son the strength of knowing right from wrong to act if these situations arise.* (Site W, Survey, Parent)

> *Sometimes they do [involve parents when responding to sexual harm] sometimes they don't. Depends if they choose to believe [the student] or not.* (Site W, Survey, Parent)

> *The teachers seem to think that it is fine for male pupils to receive sexual slurs "xxxx is so gay", etc... and do nothing about it.* (Site W, Survey, Parent)

> *Most important is that students feel their experience will be taken seriously by staff rather than being dismissed or being told off for complaining as currently is the case.* (Site Y, Survey, Parent)

While some schools discussed positive relationships with parents, for many staff there was a dominant perception that parents are unaware, or naive to the realities, of adolescent sexual development and harm. Instead, the research suggests that parents are aware and receptive to these challenges, and schools should harness the opportunity of involving parents as partners in safeguarding responses. Given these opportunities, it is notable that the study identified a number of barriers, both perceived and actual, to parental engagement.

Parental engagement

There were differences between how the schools engaged with parents on issues of HSB. At some schools parents reported good communication. At others, communications challenges were highlighted, a number of which appeared unique to a school setting. The following sections detail challenges identified in the all-boys and special schools that participated in the study.

All-boys school

Within the all-boys school, concerns about how parents would react to being asked about HSB acted as a barrier to staff engaging parents on this agenda. Schools were given the option to disseminate the survey, and as this school did not receive any responses from parents, it is difficult to gain parents' view.

It was clear that staff assumptions about the 'culture' of parents and families connected to the school prevented engagement. Firstly, some staff perceived that it was not necessary to educate or engage students and parents about sexual relationships and HSB due to the perceived cultural backgrounds of parents as 'sheltering' their children.

> *I think as well culturally, it's very noticeable that a lot of our boys are quite sheltered from girls, or parents would like to think they are, and because it is an all boys school, it really doesn't, it's not at the forefront of our problems is it really, at the moment?* (Site X, Interview, DSL)

Secondly, when instances of sexual behaviour did occur, it was evident that schools and students were worried about informing parents for fear of negative reactions:

> *We've had cases where boys have been watching pornography, because they sometimes come into school and try to use our computer, they get flagged up straight away, and they've said to us, "I can't get it at home", and they don't want us to contact their family to let them know what has happened, they're so scared, some kids are so terrified, they start having a panic attack, it's that bad, so we take all of that into consideration.* (Site X, Focus Group, Staff)

> *It's a cultural thing, they don't feel like they can really, they can't talk to their parents about anything to do with sex, which makes it difficult for them, they have to keep it all in, and they come to school and try to access some cyber thing.* (Site X, Focus Group, Staff)

Within this school, staff voiced these challenges frequently throughout the research, suggesting that they recognised these issues as preventing the school from working with parents on HSB. However, there was little evidence to suggest that the school was taking

steps to overcome these barriers, which in turn appeared to prevent positive interventions to support healthy sexual development amongst students.

Moreover, in this school, homophobic bullying was very prevalent. It was apparent that this school felt that they could not promote LGBTQ+ rights due to perceived community backlash.

> *I think what we are conscious of, like a lot of schools, is that there are some organised groups out there who if we were very overt and very public on our website around LGBT rights and that sort of thing… I don't think it would be particularly parental, I think it would be other community groups trying to manipulate parents, but that's the only sort of barrier I can think of.* (Site X, Focus Group, SLT)

The implications of this is that perceptions about parents' reactions seemed to supersede the rights of the child, preventing positive education and keeping young people safe from harm.

It is important for all schools to explore these challenges, and identify which are actual barriers and which are perceived, based on staff assumptions and biases, and take steps to address both staff perceptions and assumptions and barriers to parental engagement.

Special schools

Research in the special schools highlighted three main challenges for parental engagement:
- Students often travelled long distances to get to school and were drawn from large catchment areas, which had implications for the amount of contact that parents had with school.
- Some parents have their own learning disabilities and schools found this acted as a barrier for how they were able to engage parents to address HSB.
- Staff in special schools often raised the issue that some parents seem to define their children as asexual because of their disability, which has implications for parents' ability to identify or recognise HSB.

While these issues were identified within the special schools, they are not necessarily unique to these settings. The findings suggest that special schools may need greater support to identify alternative routes for parental engagement. One school had a Facebook page that facilitated parental engagement generally and so could act as a basis for discussion regarding relationships and sex education, for example. Secondly, in addition to age- and developmentally-appropriate resources for young people, it is important that parents are provided with information on sexual development in accessible formats. Finally, schools would benefit from greater guidance on supporting parents with information tailored for young people with disabilities,[11] particularly around sexuality.

What do parents want?

Evidence from the parent survey suggested that despite some schools' wariness of involving parents in relation to HSB, most parents are open and willing to being involved. Of the 73 parents who answered, 81% think they should be involved in working with the school to prevent sexual harm. Parents provided a range of ideas about what they wanted to see in schools, which could be categorised into four themes (see Figure one):

Figure one: Parent survey findings: What parents wanted to see in schools in relation to school responses to HSB.

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[11] We have opted to use person first language throughout the article. However, we acknowledge that a wide range of language is used to describe young people with a disability.

Support available:	**Relationships and sex education:**
•Having more staff available for managing pastoral issues. •Lessons for parents on different forms of bullying. •Learning coaches to be both male and female where possible. •Social media training, parent groups, and parents' evenings.	•For their children to receive positive sexual and relationship education •For their children to receive education around pornography •Education on children's rights and how to engage with their children on this issue.
Physical school environment:	**Issues outside school:**
•improving safety around the school's physical environment.	•To hear how issues were being handled for incidents occurring outside the school.

Over half of parents surveyed (59%) agreed that they feel "confident the school contacts parents when these issues arise", but only 19% reported thinking the school is good at involving parents when responding to sexual harm.

In particular, parents suggested they wanted better communication with the school around HSB, whether that be information relating to safety, more frequent emails or the provision of resources to support them to identify HSB and engage with their children on the issue. Furthermore, some parents seemed unclear of the process the school uses to refer cases to social care and the police, which could be seen to fracture relationships between the school and parents.

Recommendations:

The findings point to a number of recommendations for schools.

Recommendations for schools:

We recommend that schools consider:

21. What barriers exist in engaging parents about sexual harm (this could be done by considering at what point schools connect with parents about HSB)
22. Ways to engage parents on responses to HSB, prior to and following incidents.
23. Opportunities to engage parents through emails and resources.
24. Ways to engage parents in discussions on sexual harm, how well the school respond to these issues, and how the school's response could be improved. Guidance on carrying out parent surveys can be found here.

Disability

Five special schools participated in the research, which constituted 35% of the sample size. Analysis identified three key themes to addressing HSB within special schools. It is important to note that although young people with disabilities from mainstream or alternative education also participated in the research, the themes explored in this section are drawn from data related to young people with a disability in special schools rather than young people with a disability across the 16 schools generally.

Resources and expertise

A significant barrier to addressing HSB within special schools was the lack of tailored, coordinated or evidence-informed guidance or resources available nationally for special schools on the issue:

> *You do things and the sharing good practice models are just not, they're not robust, it's always just based on the goodwill of people and we find that there isn't, in the special school population, there isn't that same sort of network and as you do in a mainstream school and you get random pop-ups.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

DSLs and staff in special schools highlighted gaps within national and local guidance and a lack of tailored resources in relation to sexual development and HSB for young people with a disability, such as on preventative work in RSE education, awareness-raising with students and their parents and carers, and identification of, and response to, HSB occurring between their students.

Special schools also reflected that there was a limited understanding of disability and HSB within the multi-agency safeguarding partnership. They reflected that this further limited the expertise and advice the schools could draw on to support their prevention of, and responses to, HSB. One DSL, for example, discussed reaching out to the HSB lead within the multi-agency partnership to get advice on a case:

> *She [HSB lead in partnership] sat and listened to me for an hour and went, "yeah, that's what I would have done", "that's what I would have done" …! That was it! She had a cup of coffee and off she went.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

This DSL felt that the HSB lead in the partnership was unable to offer specialist advice in relation to the case or to offer further suggestions on how to respond. Those working in special schools overwhelmingly felt that specialism in relation to children with a disability and HSB was largely held within special schools rather than within HSB resources in multi-agency partnerships.

In response to the lack of local or national knowledge related to young people with disabilities and HSB, schools suggested that they relied on their own expertise in order to respond to their students' needs when incidents occurred:

> *We're not getting any help, we need to do it ourselves, how do we do it?", she's [DSL] not one for sitting around doing nothing, we do it ourselves.* (Site Z, Interview, Deputy DSL)

In light of the gaps in specialist knowledge within multi-agency partnerships, participating special schools sought support from private specialist organisations and voluntary and community sector partners to develop bespoke HSB resources and RSE content tailored to the particular needs of their students. Drawing on private organisations had cost implications

for special schools and decisions over the use of these sources of support were made in line with resource and budget constraints.

In the absence of multi-agency expertise on HSB and young people with a disability, special schools formed their own support networks and worked with other special schools on a national level to share learning and resources:

> *A secure network of SENCO's … ensures that we are able to work easily alongside other colleagues from other schools to share knowledge.* (Site Z, Self-Assessment Audit completed by a special school)

Furthermore, there was evidence of special schools using the expertise developed in-house about young people with disabilities and HSB to support the response of the wider safeguarding partnership. One school, for example, worked with police in the local area to improve their responses to working with young people with a disability displaying HSB: for example creating a protocol, developing training for police and introducing a flagging system for young people when entered on police databases.

School leads, DSLs, pastoral staff, school nurses and parent liaison workers within schools also played a significant role in supporting students with issues related to HSB to transition to further education or to engage within the wider community. One school, for example, discussed how they supported the partnership to risk assess and support one of their students displaying HSB to transition to college and safely engage in public spaces:

> *He was given activities to do deliberately in the community when they were risk assessed because it was getting to the stage where some of the staff didn't want to take him out, it was like "if you're going to take him out, he's not going to ever learn what to do and he's 18 years old", ... He went to a college around the corner, he went to the [name] Centre in [local area] which is like safe spaces, he was going to community areas…, so safe places were identified rather than become socially isolated, so there was a large risk assessment done at the time.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

Input from multi-agency partnerships and national expertise on how schools address HSB is crucial for effective and consistent responses.[12] The research evidenced significant gaps in specialist input afforded to special schools participating in this research around the issue of HSB for young people with a disability, which is echoed in other studies.[13] Special schools are requesting specialist support and, in its absence, there is a risk that effective responses to HSB with young people with a disability are impeded and the needs of these young people are not being met.

The increasing expertise developing in special schools, evidenced by this research, is an important enabler to addressing HSB in such schools. In addition, the relationships being built with multi-agency partners, and the sharing of this to build expertise and knowledge within the wider safeguarding partnership, is a real strength highlighted in the research. The reliance on private specialist services to build this in-house knowledge however has cost and resource implications and this option will not be viable for all special schools. While developing expertise in-house is a strength, special schools are unable to draw on expertise from multi-agency

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[12]Firmin, C., et al. (2019). "Beyond referrals: levers for addressing harmful sexual behaviours between students at school in England." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education **32**(10): 1229-1249.

[13] Taylor, J; Stalker, K; Fry, D; Stewart, ABR. (2014). "Disabled children and child protection in Scotland: An investigation into the relationship between professional practice, child protection and disability." Scottish Government Social Research, Edinburgh, accessed 17 April 2020. www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00447850.pdf.

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partners. This is particularly significant for cases that meet a threshold for external referral and intervention from the police and social care.

Identification of harmful sexual behaviour in special schools

Identifying HSB in schools is crucial to prevent and respond to concerns. Within special schools, a number of factors impeded effective recognition of HSB. Firstly, schools highlighted difficulties due to social care and other safeguarding professionals viewing the students' sexual behaviours solely through the lens of the young person's disability. This issue was discussed, for example, in relation to the categorisation of sexual behaviours as 'sensory seeking'. DSLs and other staff in special schools felt that wider safeguarding professionals predominately perceived student masturbation or inappropriate touching in school to be a result of a young person's disability, and therefore as sensory seeking rather than as forms of HSB. DSLs, however, felt that on some occasions these behaviours should be defined as HSB. They believed that other multi-agency professionals did not consider sexual behaviours displayed by young people with a disability in relation to contextual or developmental factors that might be driving the behaviour, leading to an under-identification of HSB amongst their students. DSLs in special schools discussed the challenges of identifying HSB when social work professionals use of the description sensory seeking rather than masturbation:

> *But to me, if you've got a child who's knowledgeably aware, who can, like this girl can tell you, "my private parts are my bum, my boobs and my bits", this girl can tell you, "I shouldn't touch my boob, my bits and my bum in public", she can tell you that other children don't like them touched, she's got that level of understanding and if she is still continuing to do it after two years of intervention, there becomes a level of … is it self-stimulation or is there some aspects of masturbation in there?* (Site Z, Interview, DSLs)

> *So I do think it is a bit of a funny area and… you're back to this whole thing of if a disabled child does that then it's self-stimulation as opposed to masturbation, you're changing the vocabulary again which isn't always that helpful. …It's like some of the young people that you've spoken to, they're seeking those social opportunities so how can you say, "they've got the understanding to seek social opportunities and 'normal' relationships, so therefore why are they not experiencing normal feelings and normal emotions?", why are we saying that what they're doing is self-stimulation as opposed to masturbation?* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

If the sexual behaviours displayed by young people with disabilities are always seen through the lens of their disability then their sexuality is denied, limiting the potential to view these young people as displaying HSB and/or being victims:

> *But I still think, and this is a gut feeling not an actual research thing, that the general public, whether it's the local authority or whoever, or people working in other schools who don't have experience of SEN, I think almost have an idea that it [the ability of a young person with a disability to display HSB] doesn't happen here, because this idea of a perpetual child or the perpetual innocent. I don't think they're aware of the problems.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

In instances where sexual behaviours displayed by young people with a disability were recognised as harmful by wider safeguarding professionals, these behaviours were not considered across a spectrum of sexualised behaviours, but only as inappropriate sexual behaviours. Dynamics such as intent, behaviour escalation or repetition were not factors which formed part of identifying criteria:

They're locked in the inappropriate behaviour so if she's doing this ten years later, she'll still be logged as inappropriate behaviour but she might have a 12 year history of doing it. (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

I think by changing the language, this is where you get the lack of scale. This is where you get the downplaying of this. At the minute, this girl is still young, this is still inappropriate sensory seeking behaviour, so if I said to you, "she's got inappropriate sensory seeking behaviour", you think one thing. [If] I say, "she's been masturbating on a regular basis for two years and she's been trying to stick fingers up bottoms, she's trying to kiss and bite staff's bust, she's trying to put her fingers up female members of staff's bottoms, male members of staff's bottoms and has been doing this for two years", there's a huge difference. (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

Finally, professionals' ability to recognise HSB appeared further compounded by limited expertise and knowledge within the fields of both education and safeguarding as to how to communicate with young people with a disability around HSB and related issues:

I think our absolutely key of our problems when dealing with these things is about language understanding of our children. They might be feeling something or seeing something but actually don't either cognitively understand what they're saying, or have those speech and language skills to translate that into something. (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

So maybe things that have to do with gender identity or things like that, the children have these feelings, it might be expressed in a particular way where we all feel that it might be sexually harmful or whatever but actually, it doesn't mean that, it was just because they don't have that understanding to maybe express it in a particular way. I think speech and language is the crux really. (Site Z, Interview, Staff)

Addressing communication challenges and providing opportunities for young people with a disability to inform responses to HSB should be a priority for professionals, researchers and policymakers. Research has highlighted a general perception of young people with a disability that tends to deny their sexuality.[14] In order to effectively respond to HSB experienced or displayed by young people with a disability, efforts need to be made to recognise and understand their needs in relation to sexual identity, sexuality and sexual orientation. Furthermore, resources need to be developed to assist professionals working with young people with a disability in distinguishing between developmentally appropriate and harmful sexual behaviours. While not explored explicitly within the research, underpinning this is a requirement to understand the intersection, and particularly gendered elements, of identification and response to young people with a disability displaying HSB.

Thresholds and response

Participating special schools noted how barriers to effective identification of HSB amongst young people with a disability had implications for multi-agency responses in their local authority. Schools noted inconsistencies in thresholds for HSB between schools and the wider partnership. Inconsistent threshold decisions were considered by DSLs to relate, in particular,

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[14] Franklin, A., Raws, P. and Smeaton, E., 2015. "Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation." Barkingside: Barnardo's.

to a young person's disability diagnosis. Thresholds for Section 47 assessments[15] or an AIMs[16] assessment related to HSB, for example, were deemed to be higher for disabled students compared to students in the general population:

> *We've both come from mainstream and the same disclosure from a child in mainstream would probably have automatically gone for Section 47, and we've had to say well actually, no, the child is saying this, and this is what else we've seen. […] it's because of their disability.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

> *When referrals have been put in, I've had people say, "I can't understand, why haven't you got this to another Section 47 before now, it's three months since the last Section 47?", and it's like I've rung it through repeatedly and been told it doesn't meet the threshold and it can be the person who picks up the phone at the other end, around a case like this because as soon as you bring the disability into it… A couple of times, to be honest, I felt like testing it out and actually reading through the disclosure and not saying the child's got a disability and seeing what the response is, because you very much feel as soon as you've said they've got severe learning disabilities, "oh right" and then depending on the team that you get coming out, you get a different response.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

Seemingly higher thresholds for statutory involvement for young people with a disability could mean that these young people are unable to access support to meet their needs. This finding also raises questions related to equality and diversity issues and the increased vulnerability of, and lack of protection provided to, young people with a disability compared to their non-disabled peers. DSLs working in special schools identified significant consequences related to this lack of support and protection. In one school, for example, the DSLs discussed the outcome for a previous student who failed to receive support from children's social care related to displaying HSB:

> *[He had] identity issues, sexualised behaviour [inappropriately touching other pupils on a number of occasions], rising aggressive behaviours. We had to really push them to actually consider some of the difficulties he had were around identity… nobody was talking about identity… there'd been no assessment or support with regards to his identity and particularly his either gender identity or his sexual identity… [After he turned 18, in a cinema]… he went into the toilet and revealed himself and he was a big 18-year-old lad, so they rang the police. There were a number of incidents of that type of thing with him… Every time he ended up in a police station, he would come back to school and be hugely traumatised.* (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

For this student, lack of specialist support around HSB concerns prior to turning 18, were followed by similar sexual behaviours displayed post 18 years for which they were criminalised and received a punitive rather than welfare-led response.

For young people who did receive support from children's services, DSLs within the participating special school felt that the response was often ineffective and inappropriate for their students. DSLs discussed how multi-agency interventions were predominately focused on a young person's disability rather than related to HSB. Furthermore, that these interventions were designated based on a young person's functioning age without any consideration for their developmental stage, their sexual identity and needs related to this:

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[15] An assessment under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. A section 47 assessment is initiated to decide whether and what type of action is required to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child who is suspected of or likely to be suffering significant harm.

[16] An initial assessment tool that is designed to assist professionals in assessing children and young people who have committed a sexual assault or display harmful sexually behaviour.

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You're looking for signposted resources for children special needs, you get pointed in the same direction, … the [organisation] and they sent the [programme name] and we said, "Yes, we've done the [programme name] but we're talking about pupils who are older, that need something beyond the [programme name]", they sent us their … pack to trial that was designed for pupils with learning disabilities, we trialled it, we gave them feedback on the materials because they weren't age appropriate, so they still had little pictures of little children and yet they were allegedly designed for 19-year-olds. We said they need to have [different] pictures… you can't say this is for a 19-year-old when it's got a picture of a child of about 6. (Site Z, Interview, DSL)*

Yes, so when it comes to a child with a disability, they tend to either say, "contact other agencies" or it's the same materials that are produced, so there isn't age appropriate materials that come from the Social Services side of things and what surprised me very much, is there doesn't seem to ever be a question about, "Is this a child exploring their own sexuality? Is this a child trying understand their own identity?", those questions never seem to come into play when they've got their disability. (Site Z, Interview, DSL)

Whilst these three thematic factors – resources and expertise, identification of HSB and thresholds and response – may relate, to varying degrees, to responses to HSB within other school types (such as Pupil Referral Units or mainstream schools) there is an indication that these factors are underpinned by structural issues related to societal attitudes towards, and perceptions of, children with a disability. Overprotection, social isolation, disempowerment, and discourses around passivity and asexuality are factors which should be considered and further explored in relation to HSB and young people with a disability. Additionally, concerns related to young people with a disability being deprioritised by service providers and policymakers need further exploration.[17] Attention and prioritisation needs to be given to young people with a disability in relation to HSB. Barriers to identifying, protecting and supporting those who display or experience HSB need to be understood and addressed.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations from the research in relation to addressing HSB within special schools are detailed below.

Recommendations for local multi-agency partnerships:

25. Training for multi-agency partners on young people with disabilities in relation to sexual development, communication and HSB should be a priority for the police and social care.
26. Multi-agency partners should review and identify potential barriers and bias in relation to threshold decisions and interventions for young people with a disability.

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[17] Taylor, J; Cameron, A; Jones, C; Franklin, A; Stalker, K and Fry D. (2015). "Deaf and disabled children talking about child protection". University of Edinburgh NSPCC Child Protection Research Centre. Edinburgh. accessed 17 April 2020. http://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-andresources/deaf-disabled-children-talking-about-child-protection; A. and Smeaton, E. (2017). "Recognising and responding to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, child sexual exploitation in the UK." Children and Youth Services Review, **73**: 474-481; Franklin, A. and Smeaton, E. (2018). "Listening to young people with learning disabilities who have experienced, or are at risk of, child sexual exploitation in the UK." Children & Society, **32**(2): 98-109.

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27. Efforts need to be made to improve the knowledge and understanding of HSB and young people with a disability among professionals in the specialist services and those working in the local safeguarding partnership.

Recommendations for the wider sector:

28. Providing opportunities for young people with a disability to inform responses to HSB should be a priority for professionals, researchers and policymakers.
29. Researchers, policymakers and professionals need to capture, create and promote evidence-informed and accessible HSB resources that meet the varied needs of young people with a disability across a range of developmental stages.
30. Opportunities should be created at national and local levels for professionals from special schools to inform the agenda relating to HSB and young people with a disability, including the development of RSE material and policy, the creation of resources supporting schools to identify and respond to HSB, and contributing to statutory threshold decision making.

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Conclusion

This briefing presents a range of thematic findings from the second stage of the Contextual Safeguarding Programme's study Beyond Referrals into HSB in schools. 30 recommendations for schools, multi-agency safeguarding partners, local authorities and the wider field of education have been made based on the findings. Extending this study has allowed us to test and develop our self-assessment audit toolkit for schools, which is intended to support schools to identify and assess the factors that contribute to addressing HSB in schools. Schools and colleges can use the Beyond Referrals self-assessment tool to assess the extent to which they enable effective responses to HSB in their school. There are five categories of self-assessment:

- *Systems and Structures*
- *Prevention*
- *Identification*
- *Response and Intervention*
- *Cultural Context*

This new updated version includes new levers and guidance on carrying out the self-assessment. The toolkit is supported by an example completed assessment to help schools to score themselves and a range of new methods, guides and resources to support the audit process, available [here](#).

While the findings presented here and as part of this toolkit focus specifically on HSB, they are not unique to this particular form of harm, or indeed to education settings exclusively. In the next stage of this study we will be exploring expanding the toolkit to support schools to audit either responses to extra-familial harm more widely, as well as adapting and applying these audit methods for other universal provision in the community sector – such as sports and youth groups.

Appendix: Resources

Bystander interventions

Equally Safe: Mentors in Violence prevention programme, Scottish Government (2016). https://blogs.gov.scot/equally-safe/2016/02/15/mentors-in-violence-prevention-programme/

Consent

Brook (2020) https://learn.brook.org.uk/

Give and Get Consent: A resource for teaching sexual consent to Key Stages 3 & 4, Rape Crisis South London (2019) http://www.rasasc.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Give-n-Get-Consent-A-resource-for-teaching-sexual-consent-to-key-stages-3-and-4.pdf

Exclusions

Changing the story on school exclusion, The Difference https://www.the-difference.com/

HSB behaviours and continuum

Sexual Behaviours Traffic light tool, Brook (2018) https://legacy.brook.org.uk/our-work/the-sexual-behaviours-traffic-light-tool

Harmful sexual behaviour framework, NSPCC (2019) https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2019/harmful-sexual-behaviour-framework/

HSB in schools

Harmful sexual behaviour in schools training, NSPCC https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/training/schools/managing-sexualised-behaviour-in-schools-online-courses/

Why 'Zero Tolerance' Doesn't Work, Contextual Safeguarding Network https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/why-zero-tolerance-doesnt-work

Tackling Homophobic Language: Stonewall Education Guides https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/tackling_homophobic_language_-_teachers_guide.pdf

Online harassment curriculum

Step Up Speak Up! Teaching Toolkit, ChildNet (2019) https://www.childnet.com/resources/step-up-speak-up/teaching-toolkit

Peer-on-peer abuse policy guidance

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Peer-on-peer abuse toolkit, Farrer & Co (2019) https://www.farrer.co.uk/news-and-insights/peer-on-peer-abuse-toolkit/#

Restorative justice

Restorative justice and sexual harm, RestorativeJustice.org https://restorativejustice.org.uk/restorative-justice-and-sexual-harm

Reviewing Behaviour Logs

Guidance and webinar on reviewing behaviour log (2018) https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools

School mapping and safety mapping

School Mapping. Stein, N., Mennemeier, K., Russ, N. and Taylor, B. (2010). *Shifting Boundaries.* https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/assets/documents/Shifting-Boundaries-w-Copyrigh-at-Lib-of-congresst.pdf

Safety Mapping. Nyarko, S. (2018) *Safety Mapping*. https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/toolkit/assessment/neighbourhood-assessment-toolkit

Video guidance on hotspot mapping https://vimeo.com/432806255

Sexting video guidance

Sexting in schools: responses to abuse through image sharing, Contextual Safeguarding Network https://vimeo.com/380753371

Staff engagement sessions:

Staff Engagement sessions, Contextual Safeguarding Network (2018) https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools

Student engagement sessions:

Student Engagement Sessions, Contextual Safeguarding Network (2018) https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools

Therapeutic support to young people with disabilities around sexual abuse
Respond is a national charity providing therapeutic and support services to people with learning disabilities, autism or both who have experienced abuse, violence or trauma https://respond.org.uk/

University of
Bedfordshire

Website: www.beds.ac.uk/ic

Twitter: @uniofbedsCSE

For further information please contact **carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk**

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