Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

University of South Australia | Australian Centre for Child Protection

Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviours



4 December



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community as the traditional and continuing custodians of Lutruwita.

We respectfully acknowledge all Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways where we work and live, and recognise their continuing connection to the land, water and community. We pay respect to Elders past and present.



Illustration of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags by **Nakia Cadd**, Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Bunitj, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung woman.

The Centre

About the Centre

The Centre For Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (The Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Tasmania and Victoria, representing hundreds of agencies, thousands of workers, and many thousands of families and young people.

The Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture.

Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable, and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.



Connecting Tasmanian Communities Event, Launceston

We champion our members

Our members are at the heart of everything we do.

We represent them and the children and families they support.



Connecting Tasmanian Communities Event, Burnie



Australian Centre for Child Protection



Prof. Leah Bromfield



Amanda Paton



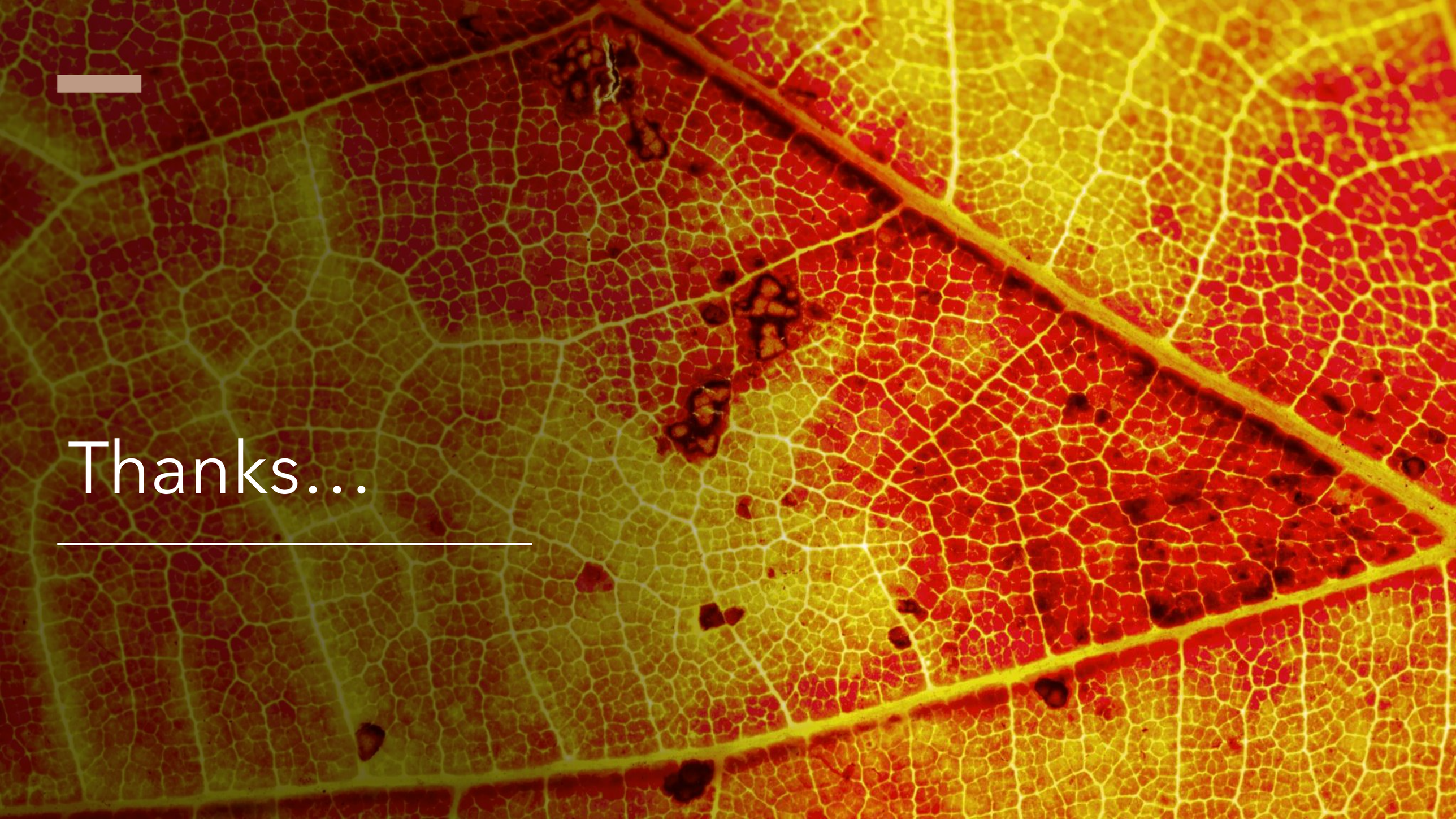
Prof. Simon Hackett

Understanding and Responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviours in Children and Young People

Tasmania, 4th December 2024

Simon Hackett

- Professor, Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA), Durham University
- Adjunct Professor, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia



Thanks…

Focus

What we mean by the concept and what we understand the scale of the problem to be

Present findings from a recent study of 510 cases of childhood harmful sexual behaviour

Emphasise the importance of responding to behaviours in a balanced, proportionate and contextual way.

Working Definition: Harmful sexual behaviours

Sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that fall outside what may be considered developmentally, socially, and culturally expected.

- May cause harm to themselves or others.
- Occur either face to face and/or via technology.
- When these behaviours involve another child or young person
  - they may include a lack of consent, reciprocity, mutuality, and
  - involve the use of coercion, force, or a misuse of power.

The ACMS (2023):

- Child sexual abuse as an urgent national challenge
- A national prevalence of 28.5%
- Girls experienced sexual abuse 2.4 times as frequently as boys, but a significant minority of both boys and girls victimized
- Adolescents aged under 18 inflicted the highest proportion of child sexual abuse (12.9%)

Upsurge in harmful sexual behaviour…

The National Police Chiefs' Council (2024) published an in-depth analysis of all recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation crime across England and Wales in the year 2022.

The report concluded that the nature of such crime is changing at a national level with child-on-child sexual abuse now accounting for just over half (52%) of all sexual crime coming to the attention of the police today.

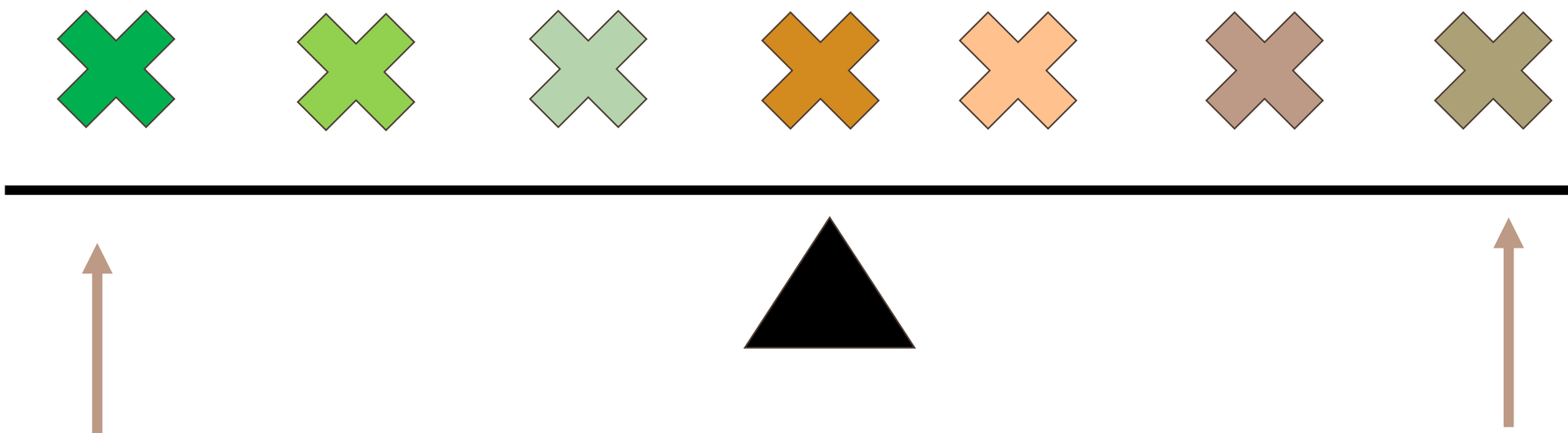
In this review, the most common age for any perpetrator of sexual crime was 14 years old. This held true for offences involving sexual abuse in the family environment as well as for offences concerning indecent and illicit images of children (IIOC).

Why the upsurge?

Exposure to pornography, sexual messages and sexting via social media may be affecting the social and sexual development of children "introducing them to sexual experiences at increasingly early ages and influencing cultural norms, particularly with respect to the normalisation of sexual violence against women and girls" (Allardyce and Yates, 2018)

Also "growing anxieties and uncertainty among adults about what constitutes normative childhood sexual development and behaviour (particularly in relation to online conduct) are contributing to a climate where **childhood sexual behaviour is increasingly monitored, policed and responded to as problematic or abusive"** (Allardyce and Yates, 2018).

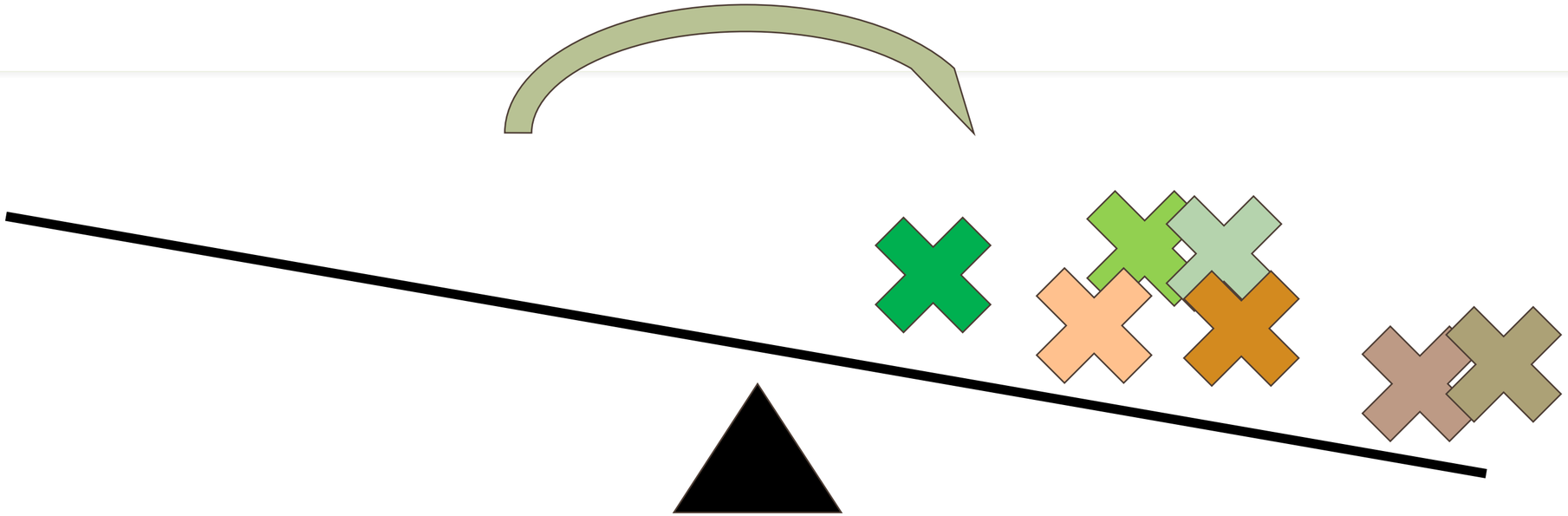
A continuum…



Extremely OK…. developmentally normative/ healthy

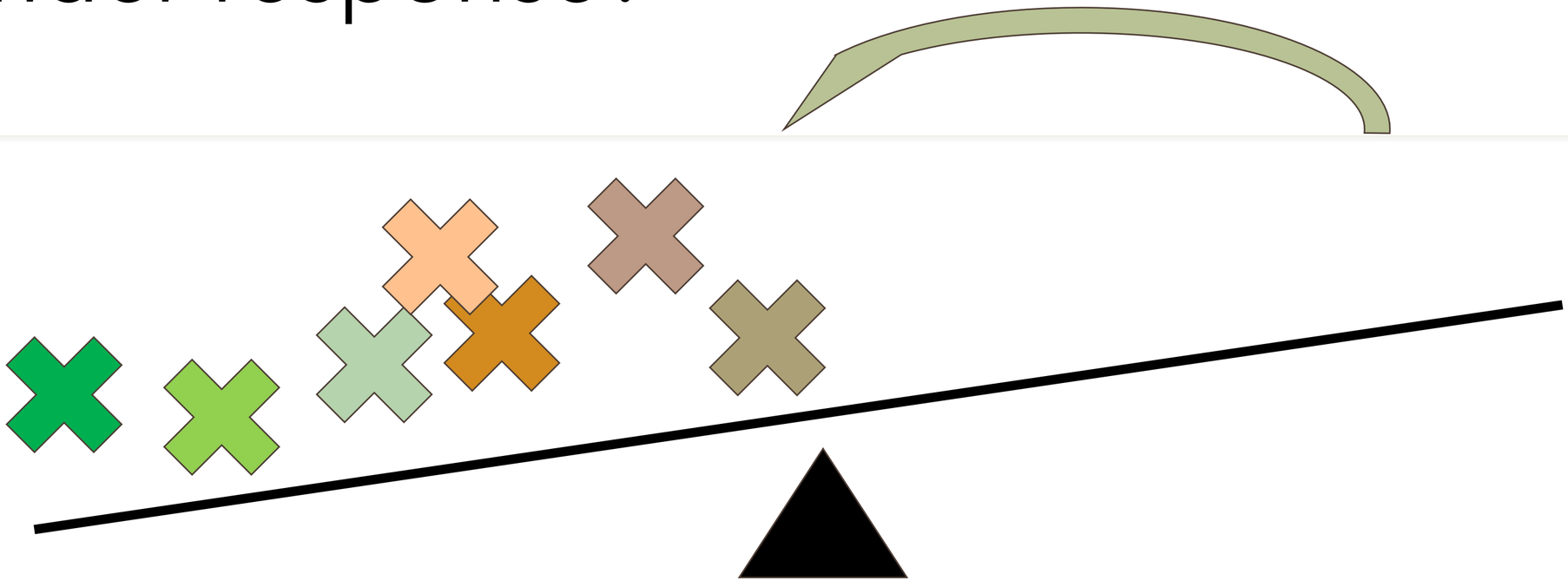
Extremely not OK….harmful/ violent/ sexual offences

Overly reactive/ punitive?



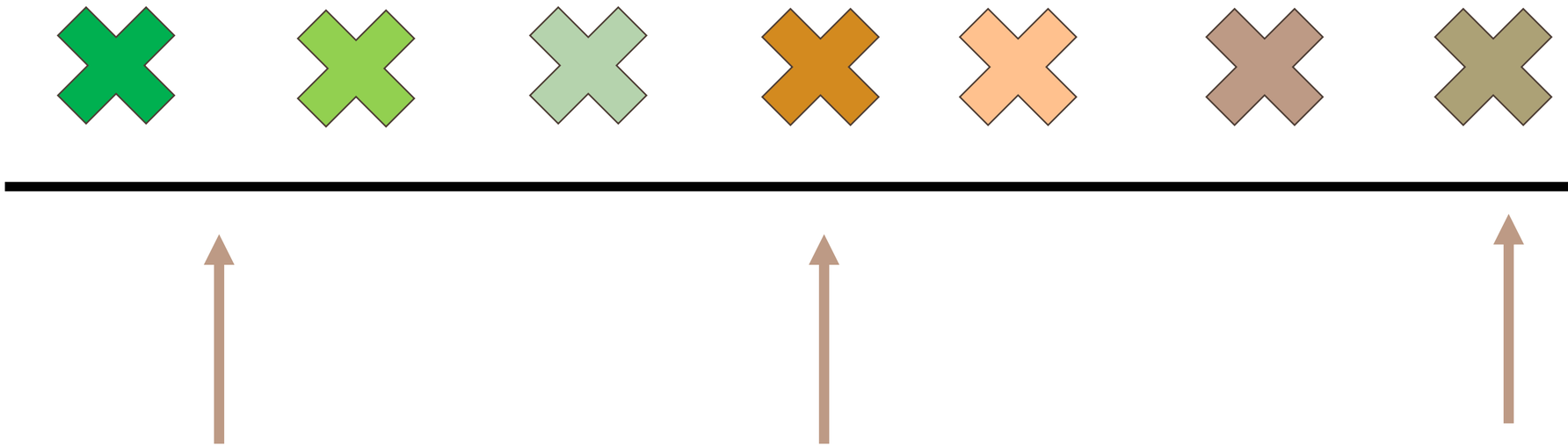
- Emphasis on risk management
- Interventions may be offered to some unnecessarily and may harm
- Risk of developmental damage and inhibited life chances
- Spillover effect to those whose behaviours are developmentally appropriate

Under response?



- Less labelling
- Less risk of damage through interventions
- But, safety issues and risk of harm may remain unchallenged
- May mean that some higher level needs unmet
- Risks unsafe systems and risky cultures

The need for balanced responses…



Normal

- Developmentally expected
- Socially acceptable
- Consensual, mutual, reciprocal
- Shared decision making

Inappropriate

- Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group
- Context for behaviour may be inappropriate
- Generally consensual and reciprocal

Problematic

- Problematic and concerning behaviours
- Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected
- No overt elements of victimisation
- Consent issues may be unclear
- May lack reciprocity or equal power
- May includes levels of compulsivity

Abusive

- Victimising intent or outcome
- Includes misuse of power
- Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance
- Intrusive
- Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given by victim
- May include elements of expressive violence

Violent

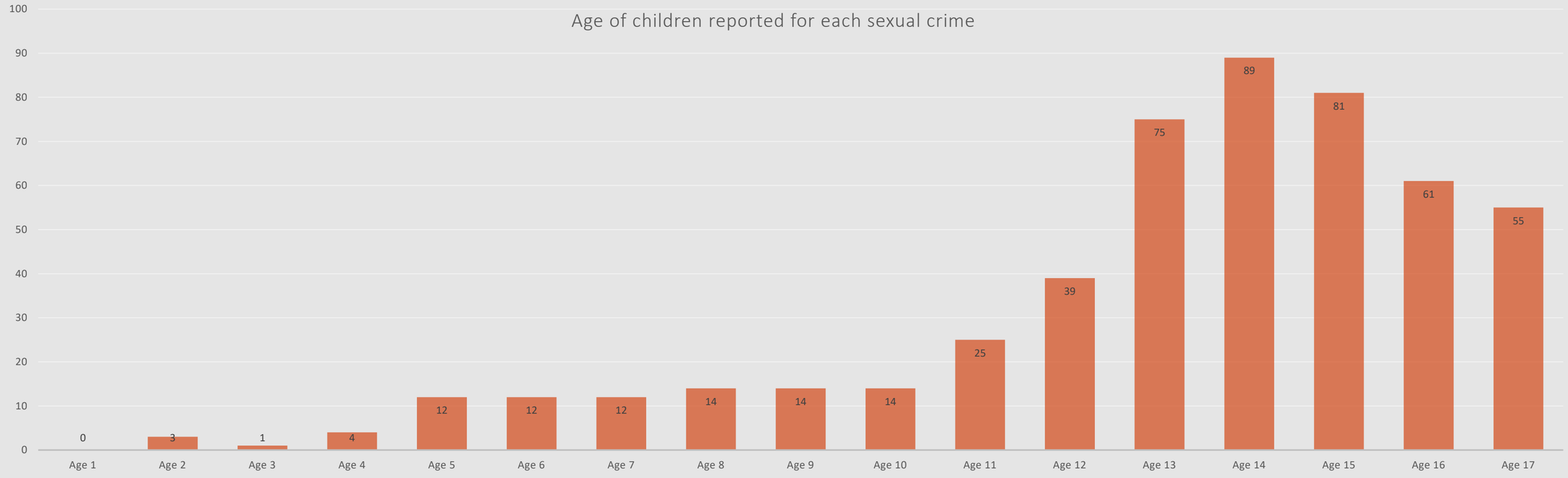
- Physically violent sexual abuse
- Highly intrusive
- Instrumental violence which is physiologically and/or sexually arousing to the perpetrator
- Sadism



Analysis of 511 cases in the NE of England

- One of 43 police authorities in the England and Wales
- Area serving a population of 595,308
- A police authority that was rated as outstanding in national inspection
- All cases in a 12-month period, late 2018-2019 (with a four-year follow-up)
- Collaborative work with colleagues Kate Butterby and Sam Level

511 reports of ‘sexual crime’ involving children <18 over a 12-month period



Normal

- Developmentally expected
- Socially acceptable
- Consensual, mutual, reciprocal
- Shared decision making

Inappropriate

- Single instances of inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Socially acceptable behaviour within peer group
- Context for behaviour may be inappropriate
- Generally consensual and reciprocal

- 84 cases
- No evidence of any lack of reciprocity, consent, misuse of power, etc.
- Lots of underage sexual activity, not just intercourse
- Most contact behaviour occurred at home
- Narratives almost always framed as ‘offence’, ‘crime’ and ‘abusive behaviour’ (even if NFA)

EXAMPLES:

- “Suspect and victim are in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. Suspect kisses victim on the neck with consent and gives her a 'love bite'. Victim's mum sees the 'love bite' and contacts police believing the relationship to be inappropriate. This crime does not meet scas criteria and not reported to scas.” (Two 13-year-olds)

Have we gone too far in the response to normative and inappropriate childhood sexual behaviours?



When does recognition of a problem become an assault on the very notion of childhood?

EXAMPLES:

"Victim goes to local shops with male friend and then walks to local park, when at the park male asks female victim to perform oral sex upon him which victim does." (16-year-olds)

Problematic

- Problematic and concerning behaviours
- Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected
- No overt elements of victimisation
- Consent issues may be unclear
- May lack reciprocity or equal power
- May includes levels of compulsivity

- 101 cases
- Dynamics of the 'crime' may be non-exploitative, but developmentally out of step?
- Lots of online behaviours suggestive of 'normal' sexual interest, but not reciprocal or problematic expression and dynamics
- The language of self-generated 'child abuse imagery'
- Lots of 'inappropriate touch' between younger children
- Normative childhood sexual interest, problematically expressed?

- 297 cases involving victimization, coercion, assault
- Wide range of intensity, duration and variability in context
- Very small number of ‘violent’ sexual offences, but physical force more likely in groups
- Group based mainly in public places
- Individual opportunistic assaults mainly in public places
- Abusive relational, family members but relatively little sibling, mainly home
- Exploitative online behaviours, trickery, lack of choice, distribution
- Only one incident directed towards an adult

Abusive

- Victimising intent or outcome
- Includes misuse of power
- Coercion and force to ensure victim compliance
- Intrusive
- Informed consent lacking or not able to be freely given by victim
- May include elements of expressive violence

Violent

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- Sadism

EXAMPLES:

"While the victim and the suspect were sharing a bed at their grandmother's home, the suspect has asked the victim to have sex, he has taken down his pants and tried to kiss her vagina when she stopped him, he has kissed her bum" (aged 7 and 6)

"Whilst on a family holiday at a B&B, the adults remain in the bar area on the evening whilst the child victim and the child suspect go to one of the bedrooms. The suspect locks the bedroom door and tells the victim he will give him a 'bum massage'. The suspect tells the victim to close his eyes. (*Assault is then detailed*…). The victim does not tell anyone until 5 months later." (15- and 9-year-old)

Abusive

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Violent

- Physically violent sexual abuse
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Have we gone far enough in meeting the needs of those children with problematic and harmful sexual behaviours?

- Are we being:
- Proportionate and balanced?
- Contextually focused?
- Developmentally focused?

What would it need for us to (truly) be able to say this to the children we work with?

“I’m going to work with you to help you find a future that is stable, in a risk-free environment, so you can think and behave in a way that involve less risk taking, where you can make a long-term commitment to relationships with others, be valued in your social context, and where you can get involved with things that are good for you and others.”

Drawing all these threads together?

The need for a range of responses which are tailored to levels of risk and need

The importance of more contextual understandings and responses

The need for developmental sensitivity in responses

Our systems manage incidents, rather than address systemic and underlying influences (both risk and protective)



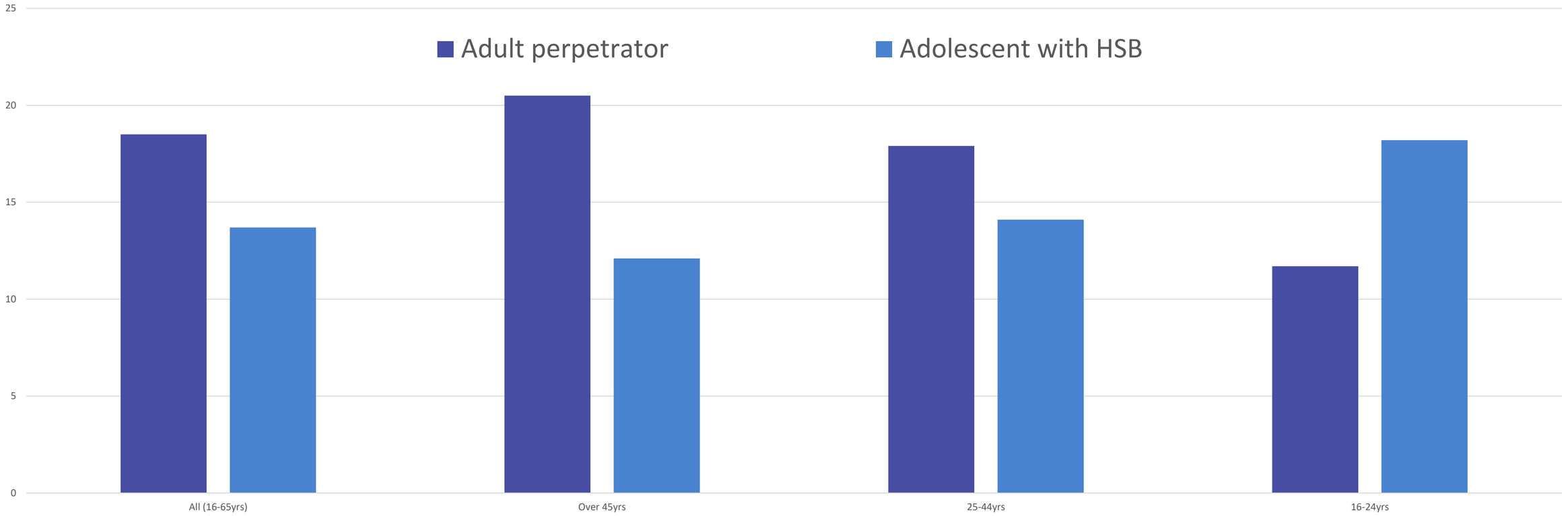
De-stigmatising sexual behaviours:

A layered approach to recognising harmful behaviours

Amanda Paton - Deputy Director Practice
Professor Leah Bromfield - Director

Australian Centre for Child Protection

Trends over time in adult perpetrated CSA compared with adolescents displaying HSB



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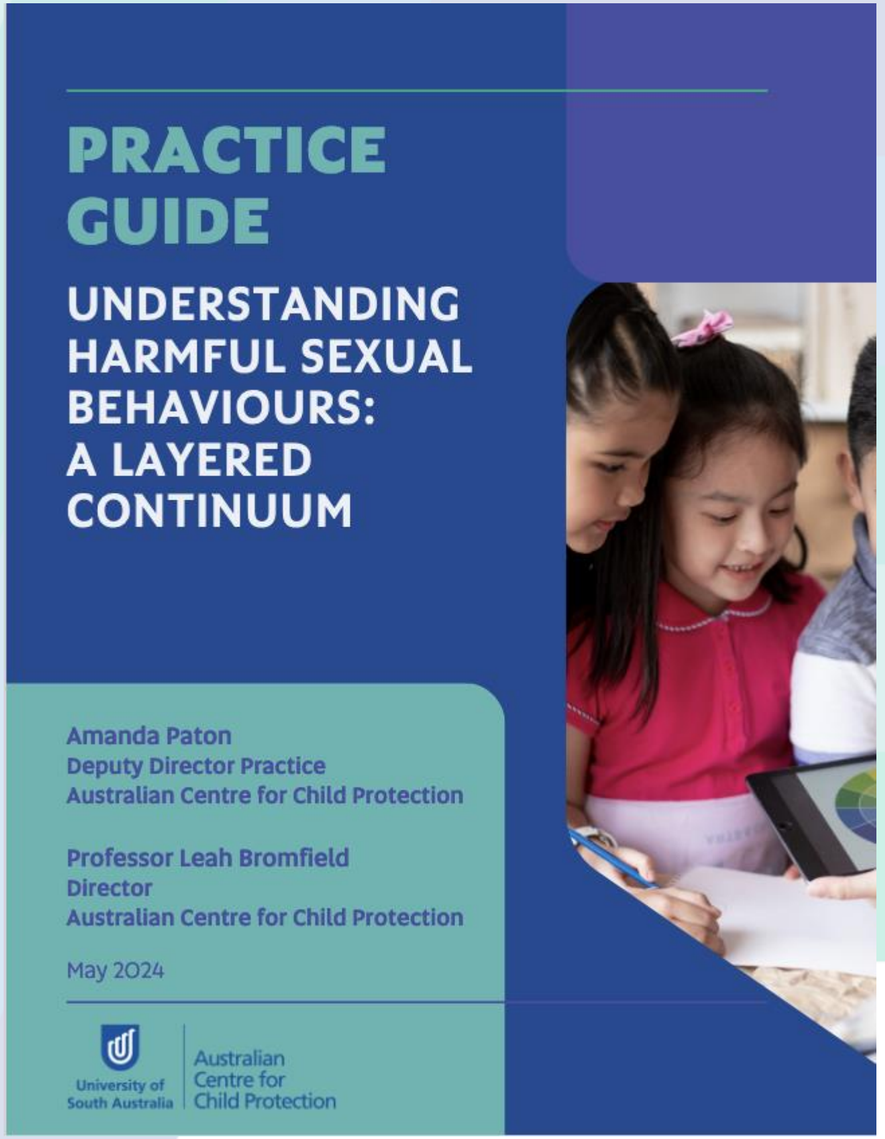
www.acms.au

Harmful sexual behaviours

Sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people that fall outside what may be considered developmentally, socially, and culturally expected.

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Layered Continuum



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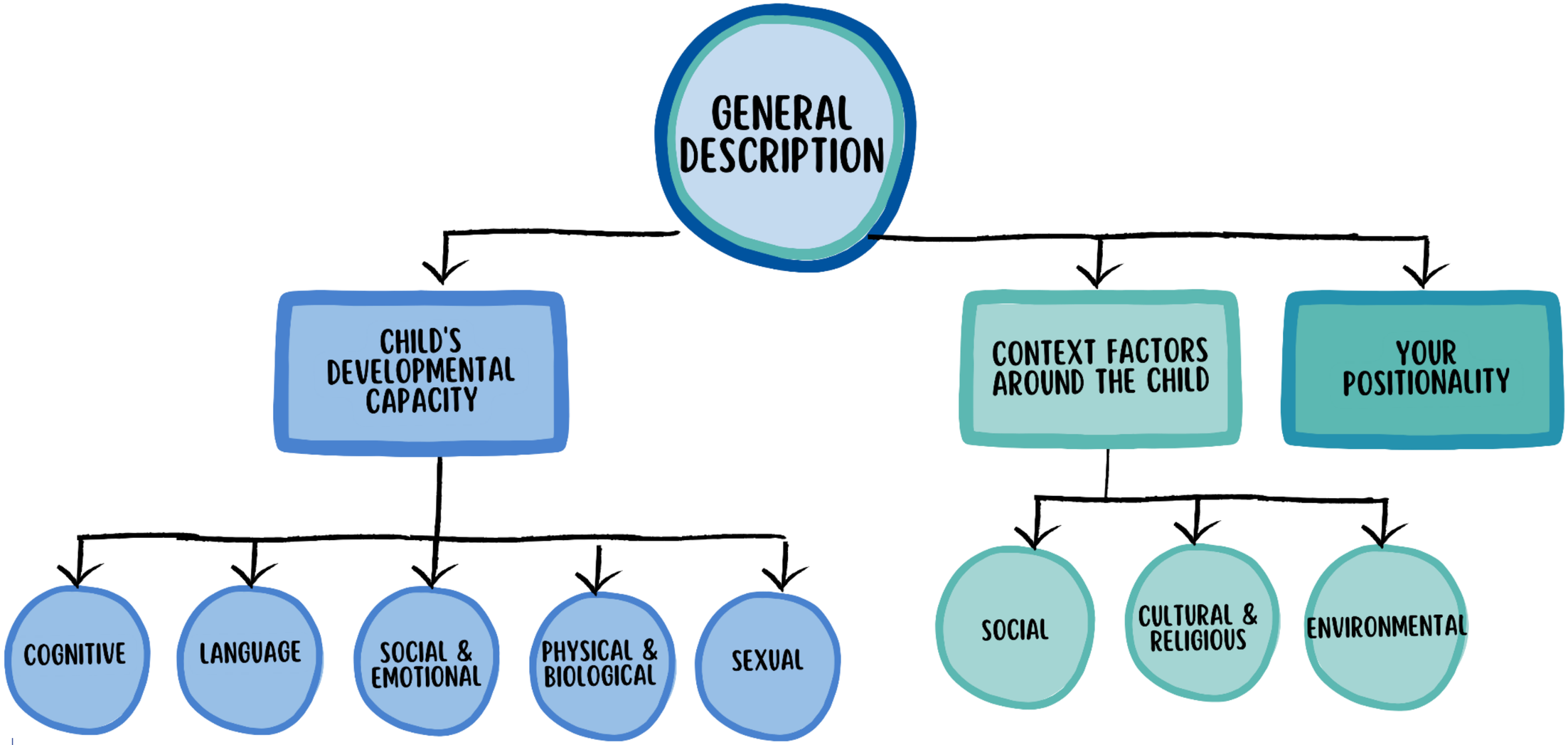
Layered approach to understanding HSB

- 1st step - orient the **behaviour** within the child's **context**:
- 2nd step – consider the dynamic between children (**respect, mutuality and consent**)
- 3rd step – explore the **emotional experience** of those involved
- 4th step - consider the **pattern** of the behaviour

Step 1. General description of the behaviour *- exploring developmental and contextual domains*

Descriptor	Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/ Extreme
General description of the behaviour	Behaviour that is expected for a child's developmental stage.	Sexual behaviour that is outside what is expected for the child's developmental stage.	Behaviours in this series are considered Harmful Sexual Behaviours.		
			Behaviour that is clearly outside developmental expectations.	This behaviour is clearly outside developmental expectations and is often intrusive and harmful.	Behaviours may include elements of physical violence, sadism, degradation, and be highly intrusive and harmful to others.
Child's Developmental Capacity - Consider varying developmental abilities across sexual, cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains. Whilst this won't necessarily change the harm cased (particularly when involving another child) it may impact the level of concern you have regarding a specific behaviour and therefore responses.					
Contextual Factors Around the Child - Consider the social, cultural, religious and environment context of the behaviour. Whilst this won't necessarily change the harm cased (particularly when involving another child) it may impact the level of concern you have regarding a specific behaviour and therefore responses.					
Consider your positionality - What is your positionality, the lens through which you are observing the behaviour? Considering both the professional and personal self, reflect on any potential bias or predetermined perspective which you bring to this review.					

Developmental and contextual factors to consider



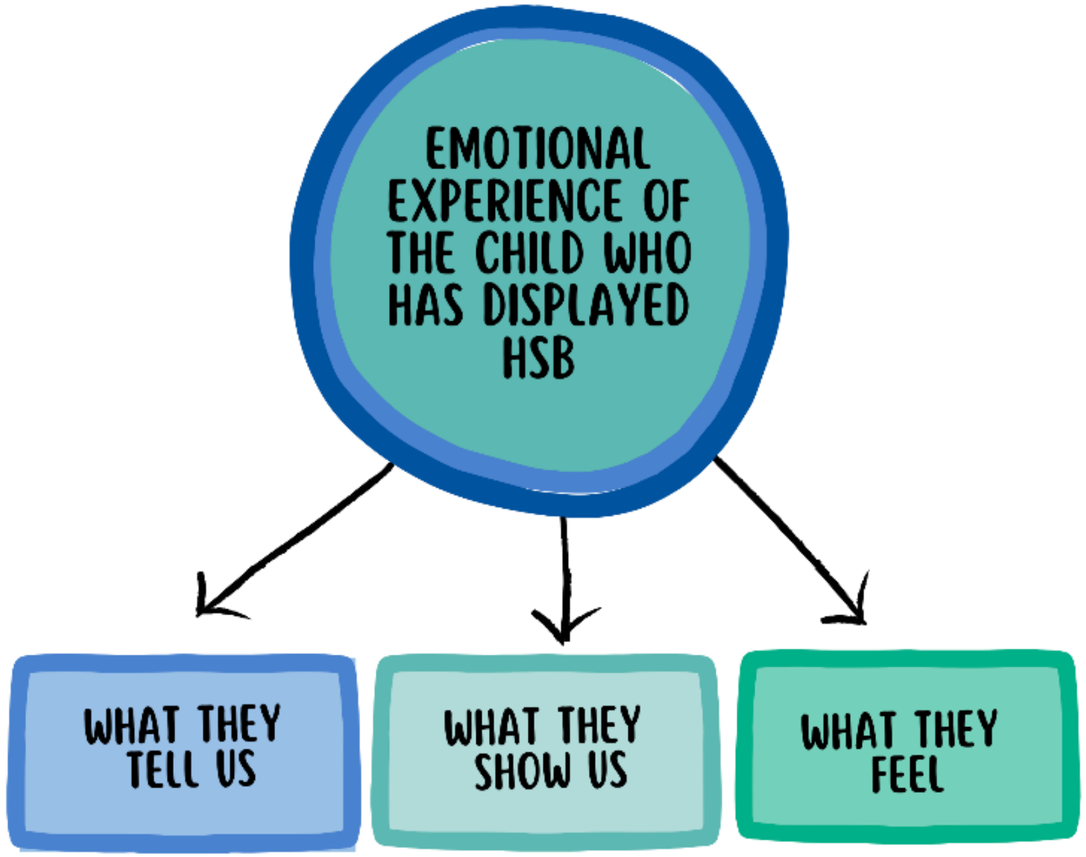
Step 2. Consent, mutuality, reciprocity, and respect

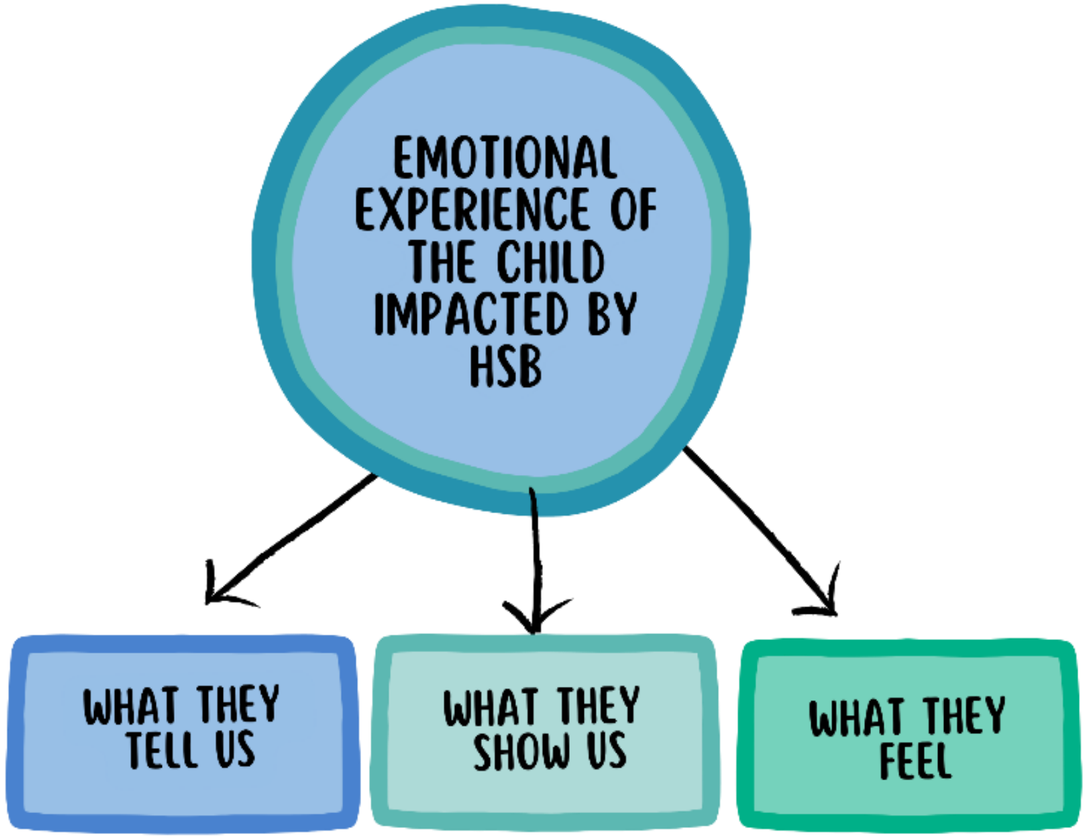
Descriptor	Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/ Extreme
Consent, mutuality, reciprocity, and respect for a behaviour involving another child or young person	The behaviour is mutual and reciprocal.	Generally consensual and reciprocal.	Unequal power including moderate age gap between children, reduced respect, or non-consent.	Includes non-consent, bribery, coercion, disrespect, or large age gap between children.	Includes force, coercion, disrespect, deception, threats, ‘sextortion’, manipulation, or large age gap between children.
Behaviours across the continuum, including Developmentally Appropriate behaviours, may be opportunistic, purposeful, or planned.					

Step 3. Emotional experience and response

Descriptor	Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/ Extreme
Emotional experience and expression	Generally positive or neutral.	May include positive, neutral, curious, or embarrassed.	May include non-emotion, extreme or intense emotion, expressed internal conflict of emotions, or non-expected emotional responses.		
Consider the expressed and internal emotional experience of the child who has displayed the behaviour. Does the emotional expression concern you? Is it negative, positive, extreme, incongruent etc					
Consider the expressed and internal emotional experience of the child who has been impacted by the behaviour. Does the emotional expression concern you? Is it negative, positive, extreme, incongruent etc					

Emotionality from multiple perspectives and levels

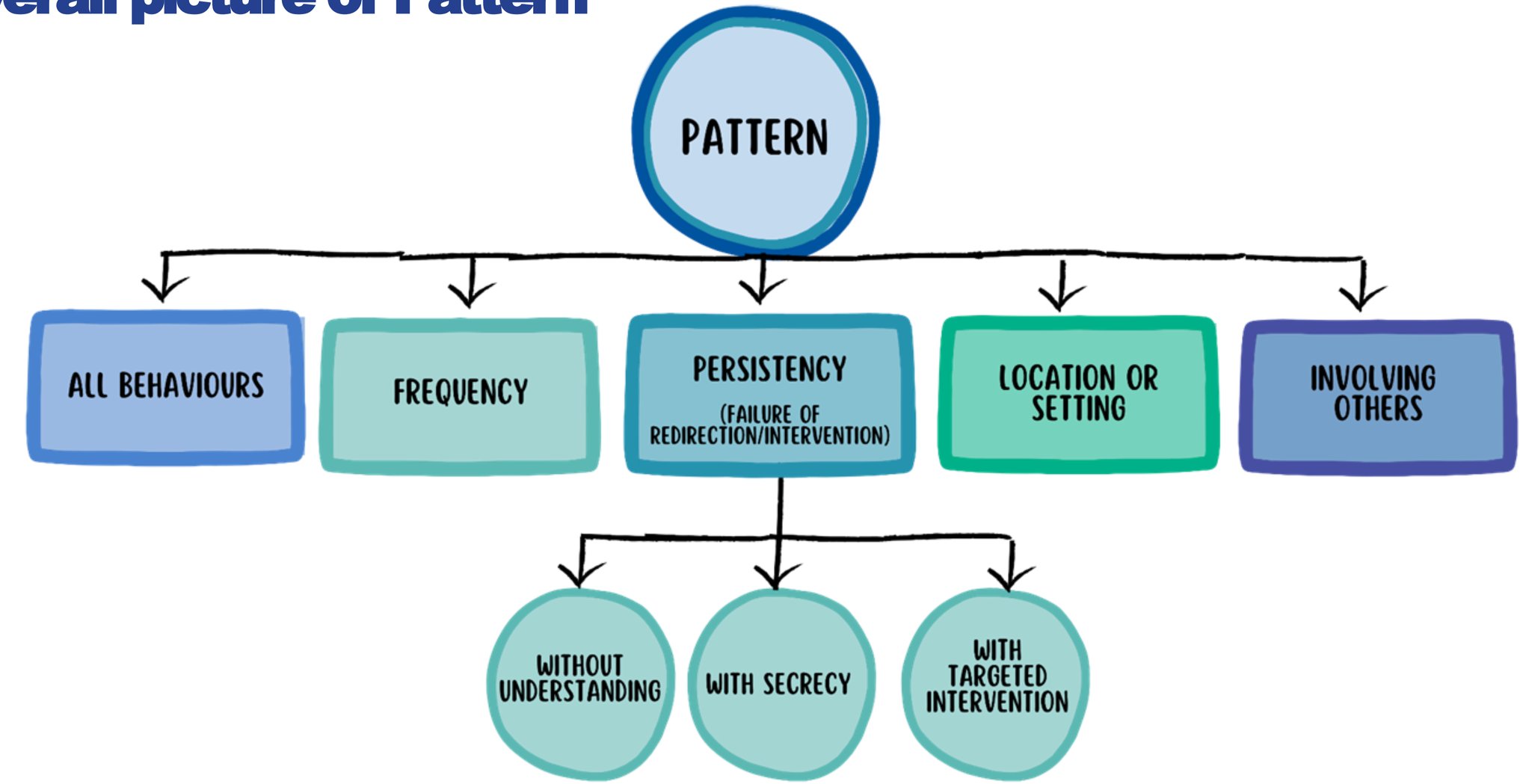




Step 4. Pattern of behaviour

Descriptor	Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/ Extreme
Pattern of behaviour • Behaviours • Frequency • Persistency • Location or setting • Involving others	Consistent pattern of developmentally appropriate sexual behaviours and interactions.	Single incidents that can be shifted with simple redirection. Developmentally appropriate behaviour occurring outside appropriate contexts, e.g., public places rather than private. Behaviour is mutual and there is equal power if involving others.	Repeated behaviours over time, escalating in type. Behaviours may persist despite active redirection and some intervention.	Often repeated and escalating behaviours. Behaviours persist despite active redirection and targeted intervention. Behaviours may also move to being done in secret. May include multiple children and varied locations/settings.	Persistent and frequent behaviours despite targeted intervention. Child/young person uses opportunities to engage in the behaviours in secret. Likely to include multiple children and varied locations/settings.

Overall picture of Pattern



Stepping through an example



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Step 1 – Orienting the behaviour - general description

- 11-year-old male
- ‘Typical’ cognitive, physical and emotional development
- Some social delays – difficulties maintaining friendships
- Masturbating - within their own bedroom
- Recently learning about puberty and sexual education at school
- He was sent a link to pornography by a stranger through a gaming platform
- Family generally comfortable with discussing sex and sexuality with him

Step 1 – Orienting the behaviour - general description

- 11-year-old male
- ‘Typical’ cognitive, physical and emotional development
- Some social delays – difficulties maintaining friendships
- Masturbating - within their own bedroom
- Recently learning about puberty and sexual education at school
- He was sent a link to pornography by a stranger through a gaming platform
- Family generally comfortable with discussing these behaviours with him

Based on just this information, where do you think you would place the child’s behaviour along the continuum?

How concerned would you be about the behaviour?

What is the level of potential harm to himself and/ or others?

Would it change if he had been diagnosed with ASD?

Step 2 – Dynamic with others – online

- He feels curious about his sexual feelings
- He sends a picture of his penis to a friend, and asks for a picture in exchange
- He asks his mate to keep it a secret

Step 2 – Dynamic with others – online

- He feels curious about his sexual feelings
- He sends a picture of his penis to a friend, and asks for a picture in exchange
- He asks his mate to keep it a secret

Does this change your thinking on where you would place the child's behaviour along the continuum?

How concerned would you be about the behaviour now that it has moved to the online space?

What is the level of potential harm to himself and/ or others?

Step 2 – Dynamic with others

- He becomes more curious about his sexual feelings and asks his younger brother to try it too
- His younger brother is 7 years old
- He touches his younger brother’s penis and vice versa
- He asks his brother to keep it a secret – but his younger brother tells his parents

Step 2 – Dynamic with others

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- His younger brother is 7 years old
- He touches his younger brother's penis and vice versa
- He asks his brother to keep it a secret – but he tells his parents

Does this change your thinking on where you would place the child's behaviour along the continuum?

How concerned would you be about the behaviour?

What is the level of potential harm to himself and/ or others?

Step 3 – Emotional experience

- His parents speak with him about the behaviour with his brother, and he begins to cry, doesn't understand why he is doing it, but says it feels good
- He becomes very shamed about his behaviour and thinks there is something 'wrong with him' and is becoming distressed – he describes being embarrassed
- His younger brother seems really angry and confused because he doesn't understand

Step 3 – Emotional experience

- His parents speak with him about the behaviour with his brother, and he begins to cry, doesn't understand why he is doing it, but says it feels good
- He becomes very shamed about his behaviour and thinks there is something 'wrong with him' and is becoming distressed – he describes being embarrassed
- His younger brother seems really angry and confused because he doesn't understand

Does this change your thinking on where you would place the child's behaviour along the continuum?

How concerned would you be about the behaviour?

What is the level of potential harm to himself and/ or others?

Step 4 – Pattern of behaviour

- Initially he masturbates several times a week, but this soon increases to multiple times a day
- His parent speaks with him about the behaviour and the impact it is having on other activities. He reduces briefly but this is short lived as he can’t stop himself
- The behaviour has progressed from being a solo behaviour to involving others
- The behaviour has progressed from being masturbation to touching another, younger child, with an attempt to keep this secret
- His parents do not know, but e continues to initiate sharing nude images with peers online and to keep this secret

Step 4 – Pattern of behaviour

- Initially he masturbates approximately 4 times per week, but this soon increases to several times per day
- His parent speaks with him about the behaviour and the impact it is having on other activities. He reduces briefly but this is short lived
- Prior to this there had been no overt sexualised behaviour displayed
- The behaviour has progressed from being a solo behaviour to involving others
- The behaviour has progressed from being masturbation to touching another, younger child
- His parents do not know, but e continues to initiate sharing nude images with peers online and to keep this secret

Does this change your thinking on where you would place the child's behaviour along the continuum?

How concerned would you be about the behaviour?

What is the level of potential harm to himself and/ or others?



Example

https://www.unisa.edu.au/research/australian-centre-for-child-protection/our-projects/hsb-project

Final thoughts

- Children are developing sexually alongside other aspects of development
- Inappropriate and concerning behaviours can often be responded to with education, redirection, boundary setting and empathy
- Children's sexual behaviours can cause harm, and sometimes you will need to ask for help to respond
- Continuums can be useful to test our thinking and add objectivity
  - to assess potential harm
  - reconcile how concerned we are/ should be
  - guide responses so they are commensurate with potential harm and concern
  - to help prevent pathologizing or over-reacting to developmentally appropriate behaviours

Thank you

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Tasmania Child and Family Services
Learning and Development
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Thank you for joining us.

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