

Layered Continuum for Understanding HSB 2025 (Paton & Bromfield, 2025)

Descriptor	Developmentally Appropriate	Developmentally Inappropriate	Concerning	Very Concerning	Serious/Extreme
General description of the behaviour	The type of behaviour is expected for the child’s developmental stage; it is seen as socially acceptable and aligned with community expectations. It is typically considered appropriate sexual expression and/or exploration.	Sexual Behaviour is developmentally, socially, contextually and/or culturally inappropriate. Considered on the fringe of being developmentally acceptable. May be displayed as a single incident behaviour that is slightly outside the developmental norm or behaviour that may be outside the developmental norm but readily accepted within a social peer group or set context. Inappropriate sexual behaviour can include appropriate sexual behaviour that is displayed in inappropriate contexts, particularly by younger children.	Concerning, Very Concerning and Serious/Extreme Behaviours are all considered <b>Harmful Sexual Behaviours</b> . This is because they can cause harm to either the child or young person displaying the behaviours, or any other child or young person involved.		
			Behaviour that is clearly outside developmental expectations. May also include developmentally inappropriate behaviours displayed as part of a pattern of behaviour. Regardless of context, the behaviour is generally socially unacceptable even within diverse peer or social groups.	This behaviour is clearly outside developmental expectations and is considered socially unacceptable. It is often intrusive and harmful to the child or young person displaying the behaviours and/or others. A child’s intent or motivator of the behaviour may also differ markedly from the norm in this group. They may disregard the other child’s wishes, distress or resistance prioritising their own gratification or needs over others.	An extension of behaviours that are ‘Very Concerning’, ‘Serious/Extreme’ behaviours may also include elements of physical violence, sadism, degradation, and be highly intrusive and harmful to others. Particularly in early adolescence and adolescence, these behaviours may evoke sexual arousal linked to violence and use of power and force.
Consent, mutuality, reciprocity and respect - for behaviours involving another child or young person	The children involved have a shared understanding of the behaviour. The behaviour is mutual and reciprocal with no power differential or coercion.  <i>*may not be at the legal age of ‘consent’</i>	The children involved have a shared understanding of the behaviour. Generally consensual, reciprocal and includes mutuality with no or minimal power differential. Possible self-induced pressure to fit in with peers.	May involve inequity in power, lack of respect or reciprocity for the other and limited mutuality. There may be differences in the understanding of the children involved regarding the sexual nature of the behaviour or gratification experienced.	Will likely include a lack of respect for the rights of the other child, inequity in power, disregard for the concept of mutuality (particularly in early adolescence and adolescence where sexual gratification is a motivator) and will often involve coercion or force, or involvement of younger children in sexual activity which they do not understand.	Often involves force, coercion, threats, and deception with limited respect for the rights of the other children involved. The child displaying the behaviours may have developed or be developing a fixated sexual interest in younger children.

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<p>Emotional experience and expression</p>	<p>Generally positive or neutral. May include displayed curiosity, giggling, laughter and joy in younger children, and engagement or pleasure by adolescents.</p>	<p>May include positive, neutral, curious, or embarrassed, particularly if the behaviour is exposed.</p>	<p>May include non-emotion, extreme or intense emotion, expressed internal conflict of emotions, or non-expected emotional responses. Can however be accompanied with complex feelings of guilt, remorse and/or shame*, particularly where the child or young person is aware the behaviour may not be appropriate. May have feelings of confusion if there is a lack of understanding of sexual development for children with disability.  <i>*shame is an internal expression of humiliation and distress that may manifest in many ways. Particularly for those with a history of childhood trauma, external expression of shame varies and may include anger and hostility.</i></p>	<p>May include non-emotion, extreme or intense emotion, expressed internal conflict of emotions, or non-expected emotional responses. An extension of emotions associated with those in the 'Concerning' group but with greater intensity. May have feelings of confusion if there is a lack of understanding of sexual development for children with disability or special needs. May display a lack of insight, care or empathy for the experience of other children involved. Distress may be more situated in the consequences of 'getting caught'.</p>	<p>May include non-emotion, extreme or intense emotion, expressed internal conflict of emotions, or non-expected emotional responses. Varies widely and is often related to the motivating and causal factors of the behaviour, though can include shame, anger and pleasure. There is likely to be a lack of care or empathy for the experience of any children harmed by their behaviours. As with very concerning behaviours, emotional response may be more situated in the consequences of 'getting caught'.</p>
<p>Pattern of behaviour</p>	<p>Pattern of the child's sexual expression has been developmentally appropriate.</p>	<p>Sexual behaviours displayed outside of appropriate contexts are typically one-off play/peer based. Child or young person responds to redirection or explanation about appropriate context as required. Generally seen in early adolescence and adolescence as healthy experimentation or in pre-school aged children exploring their bodies. Often single incidents that can be shifted with minimal boundary setting, psychoeducation and/or redirection.</p>	<p>May be single incident, but typically repeated and sometimes compulsive/driven behaviour.</p>	<p>Often repeated but not always compulsive, behaviour can sometimes be seen to 'escalate' in level and frequency over time. Likely to persist despite targeted redirection or intervention, sometimes in secret. May involve multiple children and occur across varied locations.</p>	<p>Behaviour is often persistent and accompanied by rigid or ingrained patterns of thought that have developed over an extended period. Behaviour is likely to continue without specialised therapeutic intervention, and often persists in secret. Likely includes multiple children and varied locations.</p>