

SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN

HARMFUL SEXUAL
BEHAVIOURS
RESOURCE

A Guide for Family Day Care Educators



Author's note

WARNING: The content of this resource can be distressing and uncomfortable to read. For those with lived experience of child abuse or family violence, this content may be too confronting.

It is important that you practise good self-care. This means taking breaks, working through issues with your coordinator, another family day care (FDC) educator or service staff, and reaching out to professional supports if required. There will be regular self-care reminders throughout the document to help you do this.

Look after yourself and each other.

For a long time we haven't spoken about child abuse, especially harm that has been experienced from other children, because it can make us uncomfortable or we don't think it applies to us.

When we don't talk about it, we create an environment where it can happen, or continue to happen.

It's time to be comfortable with the uncomfortable to minimise risk and protect all children, in care and in homes.

This resource is intended to be a guide only. It is important to recognise research, definitions, data and best practice are ever changing in this sensitive space.

If you have any serious concern about the safety of the children in your care, you must:

- contact your service for advice
- contact the police and/or child protection authorities.

ALWAYS CALL 000 IF THERE IS ANY THREAT OF IMMEDIATE DANGER.

OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

Acknowledgement

Family Day Care Australia (FDCA) would like to thank Dellamarta Consulting for their role as the primary partner in the development of this resource.

We at Family Day Care Australia acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live and work, the Darkinjung People, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' continuous connection to Country, and celebrate their traditions and living cultures.

Published by Family Day Care Australia, August 2023.

Introduction

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE?

This resource is specifically designed to provide information and guidance about harmful sexual behaviours that occur between children under the age of 18 in a FDC setting.

NOTE: Harmful behaviour perpetrated by adults is called **child abuse** or, more specifically, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, grooming or neglect. The term **harmful sexual behaviours** is only used to describe the behaviours of a child **under the age of 18**. For more information, see the Definitions section on the next page.

FDC enables children to learn in a nurturing, natural and flexible home environment. The supervision and safety of the children in the care of a FDC educator must be prioritised, and there are many strategies and expectations in order to manage the risks to children.

One area of risk within FDC that has serious consequences is the risk of a child experiencing harmful sexual behaviours from another child under the age of 18.

A child in care (CIC) may experience harmful sexual behaviours from:

- children in the home (CIH)
- other children in care (CIC).

This resource will be useful for all educators in preventing, identifying and responding to harmful sexual behaviours that may occur between the children in their care.

It is expected that many educators operating FDC services will have their own family members residing with them or visiting regularly, and in some cases, this may include grandchildren or children from their extended family or community. This resource also provides vital information for educators with school aged children (5–17 years) living or regularly visiting their home, within which they are operating a FDC service.

When it comes to adult family members, including children 18 years and over, there are regulation requirements (as per [Regulation 163](#), Education and Care Services National Regulations [2011]) that include screening and checking the fitness and propriety of a person to ensure educators are creating a safe environment for the children in their care.

It is important to recognise that while these processes may help to address the risks of harmful behaviour of adults, they do not address the risks of harmful behaviour of children under the age of 18.

Introduction

DEFINITIONS

The definitions used in this space are complex and interchangeable. For the purpose of this resource, the following definitions are used:

Child abuse: any act of physical, sexual or emotional harm, neglect or grooming that is perpetrated against a child by an adult.

Children in care: any children registered and enrolled to receive care from a FDC educator under the regulation requirements for FDC and the *National Quality Framework (NQF)*.

Children in the home: any children under the age of 18 who reside permanently or part-time in the home or who visit the home regularly or on a one-off occasion. This includes biological children, children of extended family, children in foster or kinship care arrangements, neighbours or community members, children under a different care arrangement to FDC or friends who are visiting the home.

Educator: the FDC educator who is engaged by or registered with a FDC service to provide care and education to children in their own home following the guidelines and regulation requirements for FDC and the NQF.

Residence / environment: a residence at which a FDC educator educates and cares for children as part of a FDC service.

Service / service provider: the registered FDC service provider responsible for coordinating and supporting FDC educators. They act as a link between educators, families and regulatory bodies, who have the responsibility to manage all aspects of the operations of a FDC service.

Harmful sexual behaviours: developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour that is displayed by children and young people and which may be harmful or abusive (Hackett, 2014).

Harmful sexual behaviour encompasses a range of behaviour, which 'can be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults, and is harmful to the children and young people who display it, as well as the people it is directed towards' (NSPCC, 2021, p. 2).

NOTE: It is important to recognise the terms 'perpetrate / perpetrator or 'offend / offender' are not used to describe children engaging in harmful sexual behaviours. The focus must always be on the behaviour and not the child.

Introduction

Children in your care may be at risk of sexual harm or abuse from other children in your care, or from children in your home. If you have children in your home (especially between the ages of 10 and 17 years old), this risk is higher.

Your role is to:

REDUCE THE RISK



Acknowledge that there is a risk of harmful sexual behaviours and it is your role to reduce this risk by **educating yourself** and **taking action**.

RECOGNISE THE RED FLAGS



Be **aware** of the signs and indicators of harmful sexual behaviours so you can **recognise** these early. There may be indicators in the behaviour of the **children in your care** or the **children in your home**.

RESPOND & REPORT



Respond to the situation **sensitively, appropriately and promptly**, even if it involves your child. Fulfill your obligations to report the concerns to parents, the service and the authorities as required.



Noticing and responding to risks or behaviours of your own children can be very confronting and distressing. Please always seek support to help you through this process.

For more information on support services visit the Raising Children website at raisingchildren.net.au

Reduce the risk

Acknowledge that there is a risk of harmful sexual behaviours and it is your role to reduce this risk by **educating yourself** and **taking action**.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE RISK

It is important to understand and accept that there is a risk that harmful sexual behaviours may occur in your FDC environment.

Research indicates that harmful sexual behaviours are relatively common between children, particularly when there is an age difference (Bravehearts, 2023).

Australian studies find that 30-60% of childhood sexual abuse is carried out by children and young people, and 'most young people target younger children or peers, and know their victim' (KPMG, 2014, pp. 21–22).

Having children aged between 10-17 years in your home increases the risk of the children in your care experiencing harmful sexual behaviour. In 2013 a data analysis found that 'males aged 10–17 years old accounted for approximately 16% of sexual offences committed by males overall, while females aged 10–17 years old accounted for approximately 58% of sexual offences committed by all females' (El-Murr, 2017, p. 7, citing Warner & Bartels, 2015).

Even if you don't have other children in your home there is always a level of risk of harmful sexual behaviours between the children in your care.

It can be devastating to think a child could be harmed sexually in your care, but the first step is to accept and acknowledge that for many reasons, it is possible, and then take steps to prevent it.

RISKS OF SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN WITHIN FDC - WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE TELL US?

'The risks involved in family day care are not negligible, especially if other adults or older children who might have a sexual interest in the children have opportunities to spend time with them without another protective adult present' (Parkinson & Cashmore, 2017, p. 20).

'One-third of all child sexual offences are committed by teens, usually boys between the ages of 12 and 15. Offences by juveniles often involve close relationships and opportunity - perhaps a sibling or close family friend' (Bravehearts, 2023).

'Children who have learning difficulties and disorders or difficulties with impulse control, social skills or rules can also be more vulnerable to engaging in harmful sexual behaviour' (Raising Children Network, 2023).

Reduce the risk

THE HOUSEHOLD RISK TOOL

NOTE: The following information is for guidance only and must be considered in the context of a broader risk assessment process and risk management framework.

For guidance on managing risks in FDC, check out this resource from [Lady Gowrie Tasmania](#).

Are you a high-risk household?



You are considered a high-risk household if you have a child or children living in your home who meet at least one (or more) of the following criteria:

- is aged between 10 and 17 years old
- has a learning difficulty, disorder, impulse control difficulty or social skill challenges
- has direct access to technology devices, including but not limited to social media platforms, search engines and camera or video functions
- has experienced or is experiencing any type of harm or abuse

Are you a moderate risk household?



You are considered a moderate risk household if you have a child or children:

- living in your home who are aged 6–10 years old
- visiting your home who are aged between 10 and 17 years or with learning or impulse control difficulties

You may not be considered a high-risk household now, but this can change as the children in your home get older. Your family day care service may reach out to talk you through this when the time comes.

Being a high- or moderate-risk household does not mean harmful sexual behaviours will definitely occur; it simply means you need to take some additional precautions.

Are you a low-risk household?



You are considered a low-risk household if you do not have any children living in or visiting your home at any time when children are in care.

In this instance, the risks of harmful sexual behaviour are associated with the **children in your care** rather than the **children in your home**.

Reduce the risk

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Accepting, acknowledging and addressing risks associated with harmful sexual behaviour can be distressing, confronting and difficult. Educating yourself is vital, especially if you have additional contributing factors like lived experience or differing / conflicting cultural or religious beliefs.

It is helpful to understand why some children engage in harmful sexual behaviours.

There are many reasons why some children may engage in harmful sexual behaviours.

Sometimes, children may have:

- experienced or be experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect
- parent to child attachment or relationship problems, including inconsistency in primary carers, significant loss or experiences of rejection from a carer
- other disadvantages including poverty or family conflict or trauma
- received confusing or mixed messages about sex, relationships or appropriate behaviour, possibly due to early exposure to sexual behaviour, sexual activity or pornography
- lacked the opportunities or space for age-appropriate sexual experimentation and development
- lacked adequate respectful relationships and sexual health education
- challenges that impact on their developmental stage such as developmental delays, disability, challenges with impulse control or reading non-verbal cues
- low self-esteem, underdeveloped social skills, social anxiety, isolation and emotional loneliness
- problems establishing intimate relationships

(SAGDE, 2022)

NOTE: Experiencing sexual abuse does not always result in engaging in harmful sexual behaviours.

'Studies have shown that:

- not all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse display concerning or harmful sexual behaviour
- not all children and young people who have displayed concerning or harmful sexual behaviour have experienced sexual abuse.'

(SAGDE, 2022, p. 7)

Reduce the risk

LET'S EXPLORE WHAT WE MEAN BY HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS.

Many physical, emotional and even sexual behaviours between children of the same or similar age are considered to be developmentally appropriate. Educators will be aware of this as it is covered in *The Developmental Milestones, the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards* (DEEWR, 2018).

However, there are also behaviours that may be considered harmful. These can be identified by a traffic light system.

TRAFFIC LIGHT SYSTEM FOR SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS

GREEN BEHAVIOURS

Most children and young people show developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour.

This behaviour is:

- typical for their age and stage
- between children or young people equal in age, size and developmental ability
- light-hearted, curious, mutual and spontaneous
- a natural part of child development
- about curiosity and understanding their own and other people's bodies and relationships
- balanced with other interests.

ORANGE BEHAVIOURS

Some children and young people show concerning sexual behaviour.

This behaviour might:

- not be typical for their age and stage
- be between children who are not equal in age, size or power
- happen often or be intense
- make adults worry about the health, development or safety of the child or young person, or others
- be unusual for the child or young person.

RED BEHAVIOURS

Some children and young people show harmful sexual behaviour.

This behaviour may:

- not be appropriate for the child's age and stage
- exist between children where there is a big difference in age, size, developmental ability or power
- appear secretive or involve bribery or trickery
- be forceful, excessive, degrading or aggressive
- be exploitative - exploiting a child for the sexual gratification of others.

Reduce the risk



EXAMPLES OF TRAFFIC LIGHT BEHAVIOURS

● BEHAVIOURS OF CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE

AGE GROUP	GREEN BEHAVIOURS	ORANGE BEHAVIOURS	RED BEHAVIOURS
0-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable with being nude • Holding or touching own genitals • Interest in touching familiar children's (e.g. siblings) genitals when in bath • Playing doctors and nurses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessively touching own genitals • Using explicit or sexual language in play • Drawing sexual or explicit images and artwork • Pulling other children's clothes down against their will 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compulsive masturbation • Simulation of sexual touch or sexual activity • Persistently* touching genitals of other people • Sexual play including forceful anal or vaginal penetration with objects
5-9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solitary masturbation or private touch of own genitals • Looking at genitals in a mirror privately • Asking questions about sexuality and babies • Playing family and including physical touch (hugging and kissing) in play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent* nudity or exposing of genitals in public or shared spaces • Dancing or behaving in a way that is sexualised or inappropriate for their age, e.g. mimicking erotic dance videos • Persistently* watching others undress or following others to look at or touch them • Persistent use of dirty words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying involving sexual aggression • Sexual behaviour toward much younger children • Accessing rooms of sleeping children to engage in sexual activities • Rubbing genitals on other people • Talking about sex and sexual acts habitually

*Persistent: continuing to occur over prolonged periods of time.

CONTINUES NEXT PAGE ►

This table has been adapted for FDC environment from SAGDE, 2023 and RCIRCSA, 2017.

Reduce the risk



EXAMPLES OF TRAFFIC LIGHT BEHAVIOURS continued

● CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME

AGE GROUP	GREEN BEHAVIOURS	ORANGE BEHAVIOURS	RED BEHAVIOURS
10–13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solitary masturbation or private touch of own genitals • Looking at genitals in a mirror privately • Use of sexual language in discussions with peers • Hugging, kissing or touching known peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dancing or behaving in a sexualised or inappropriate manner, e.g. mimicking erotic dance videos • Marked changes to behaviours such as seeking relationships with older children • Taking and/or sharing images or video footage of a child without consent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Force or coercion of others into sexual activity • Sexual activity in exchange for money or goods • Possessing photos of naked children • Simulating intercourse with peers with clothes off • Taking and/or sharing explicit images or video footage of a child
14–17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing materials for sexual arousal • Sexually explicit mutual conversations with peers • Sexual activity with a partner of similar age/developmental ability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual preoccupation that interferes with daily function • Explicit communications that are sexually intimidating • Unsafe sexual behaviours, such as unprotected sex • Taking and/or sharing images or video footage of a child without consent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preoccupation with sexually aggressive or illegal pornography • Engaging others in sexual activity via grooming processes • Taking and/or sharing explicit images or video footage of a child

*Persistent: continuing to occur over prolonged periods of time.

This table has been adapted for FDC environment from SAGDE, 2023 and RCIRCSA, 2017.

Reduce the risk













SCENARIOS

Let's consider how this may present in a FDC environment.

It is important to remember that this guide is focusing on two possible scenarios:

- Harmful sexual behaviours of children in your care or of children in your home.
- Having a good understanding of the Traffic Light System is not just valuable for identifying concerns or risks associated with the children in your home. You can use this guide to identify when the children in your care are exhibiting inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviours.

CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE

1. The four-year-olds in your care are playing a game that involves putting the younger children to bed at night. You enter the room as they are saying goodnight and see that one four-year-old has completely removed the clothes and nappy of the younger child and says, 'Lie very still, this is a special game, I won't hurt you.'	 GREEN  ORANGE  or RED?
2. When two of the children are playing with dolls, one child uses the doll to push the other doll down on the bed and shouts aggressively, 'Shut up and do what I say! Don't make me angry, you know what will happen!'	 GREEN  ORANGE  or RED?
3. A three-year-old is toilet training and every time they head to the toilet, another toddler comes to watch.	 GREEN  ORANGE  or RED?
4. A five-year-old spends two days with you and the other three days in preschool. You have found her with her hands inside the nappy of a toddler on three occasions. The first time you weren't sure if that was what was happening so you redirected her to another activity. The second time you discussed it with her, reminded her that it was not okay and that it was important she did not touch the other children's private parts. Now she had entered the bedroom and continued with the behaviour while the child was sleeping.	 GREEN  ORANGE  or RED?

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

1. ORANGE - In some contexts the behaviour may be typical for the age (green), but there is an age difference, with the younger child having much less power than the four-year old, and the language used is also concerning and less consistent with age-appropriate play.

2. ORANGE - The behaviour and language is aggressive, forceful and not age-appropriate. If the behaviour was directed at another child, it would be considered red, but in this scenario it may remain orange as it is only directed at the dolls / in play.

3. GREEN - This is age-appropriate behaviour, and it is not uncommon for a toddler to be curious about something new and unfamiliar. It can still be addressed as it is not behaviour that should continue to be appropriate or acceptable.

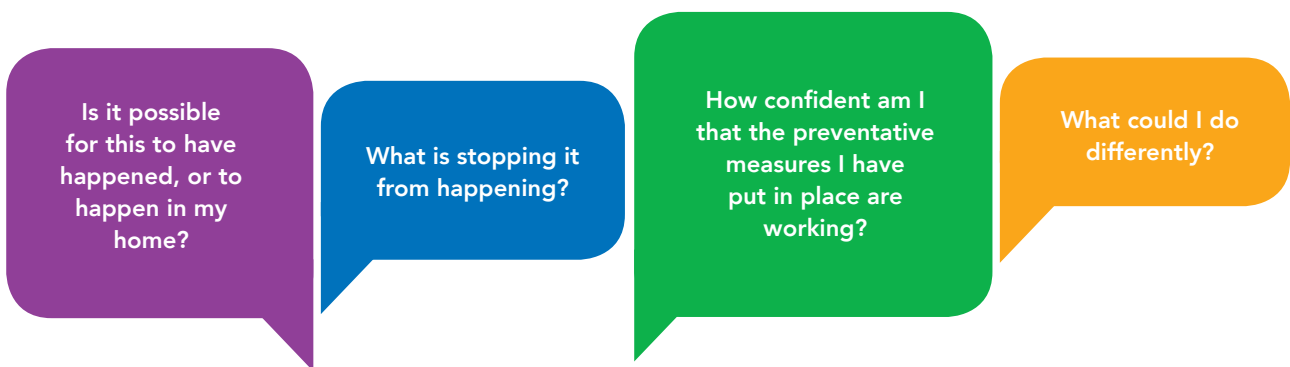
4. RED - This behaviour is repetitive, involves inappropriate physical contact with another child with a significant age difference, and has escalated to be secretive or continuing to occur in more than one environment, including a bedroom with low supervision. These responses are guides only. The most valuable part of this exercise is not the outcome but the discussion that leads to the outcome.

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Reduce the risk

Another way to consider harmful sexual behaviours of children in your home towards the children in your care is on a Behaviour Continuum. Using the same criteria as the Traffic Light System, the Behaviour Continuum can be used to demonstrate how GREEN behaviours can gradually escalate to ORANGE or RED if the appropriate measures are not put in place. Some examples are provided below.


Take a moment to consider each example carefully and reflect on the following questions:



A CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME: USE OF DEVICES

- 
1. Sitting on the couch in the same room as the children in your care.
 2. Watching a video on their phone with loud swearing in it while sitting in the same room as the children in your care.
 3. Showing videos on their phone of other teenagers dancing to music with swearing in it to the children in your care.
 4. Showing pornographic videos or sexually explicit videos on their phone to the children in your care.
 5. Using their phone to take inappropriate videos of the child in your care engaging in sexual behaviours or being harmed sexually by the child in your home.

B CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME: PHYSICAL TOUCH

- 
1. Hugging a child who has fallen in the hallway and then letting you know they are hurt.
 2. Having a child in your care sitting on their lap while you both read stories to the children.
 3. Entering the bedroom where the toddlers are taking a nap to check if they have woken yet because you are preparing lunch.
 4. Changing the nappy of a child in your care or assisting a child in your care to use the bathroom while you are putting the babies down for a nap.
 5. Undressing a child in your care in their own bedroom with the door closed.
 6. Touching a child's genitals while playing a tickling game with them in the backyard.

Reduce the risk

TAKING ACTION

First, let's recap the existing expectations of educators when it comes to protecting children.

Understanding your requirements as an educator is a great place to start. Educators have a role to play in preventing sexual harm by supporting healthy social, sexual and emotional development by:

- providing a child-safe environment that promotes the health, safety, development and care of the children
- supporting children to learn about and recognise safe and unsafe situations
- teaching children about body safety awareness using strategies that are age-appropriate
- helping children to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect
- maintaining positive, confidential, ethical and cooperative relationships with parents regarding their children's and families' needs
- involving parents, carers and other professionals—including police and child protection when it's necessary
- complying with and maintaining all requirements of the National Education and Care Services Regulation and Law and to meet and maintain the National Quality Standards
- supporting children and young people through difficult times—considering what is best for everyone, not just a single child
- conducting your business as a professional childcare service, acting in an ethical and professional manner at all times and as outlined by Early Childhood Australia (ECA) Code of Ethics
- ensuring the close supervision of children at all times.

(SAGDE, 2023)

Additionally, educators are expected to notify their service when things change within the home or the FDC arrangement that may impact their ability to create a safe environment. This includes:

- 'any renovations or changes to your residence or venue that could create a serious risk to the health, safety and wellbeing of children
- any serious incident
- any complaint alleging a serious incident has occurred or is occurring at the service
- any complaint alleging the National Law and National Regulations have been breached
- any new person aged 18 and over residing at the residence
- any circumstance that may affect whether a person residing at the residence continues to be fit and proper to be in the company of children.'

(ACECQA, 2017)

Reduce the risk

Taking additional actions to prevent harmful sexual behaviours of children in your care.

The aim is to put things in place to make it harder to happen and to make it easier to recognise it if it does happen.

You are already taking preventative measures just by fulfilling your NQF requirements in your role as a FDC educator. A spotlight on the following three areas of **SUPERVISION, PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES** and **EDUCATION** will assist you in protecting the children in your care from harmful sexual behaviours.

SUPERVISION

*The Education and Care Services National Law and National Regulations require that all children being educated and cared for at an approved service are **adequately supervised at all times** and are protected from harm and hazards. (ACECQA, 2018 [emphasis added])*

This means:

- not leaving a child alone in the presence of the children in your home at any time; it is not appropriate for you to have your teenager change their nappies, bath them or put them to bed
- ensuring that if they are in the same room as the children in your care, that you are also there in close proximity so you can see and hear what is happening

- ensuring that children in your care are never in a bedroom, bathroom or other private spaces in your house with the children in your home.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

An educator can demonstrate healthy and appropriate boundaries with the children in their care and their families. This includes the use of physical touch, communication, sharing of personal information and exposure to appropriate external material such as television shows, games, music and books.

Having clear and appropriate professional boundaries contributes to creating a safe environment for children. It also helps children learn what is acceptable (**is okay**) and unacceptable (**is not okay**) behaviour at a young age. As a result, some children will learn that particular behaviours they may feel compelled to engage in are inappropriate, decreasing the likelihood that they will carry out or repeat them.

Reduce the risk

TIPS FOR PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Friendly not a friend - This is particularly helpful when setting clear boundaries with parents and families. It is important to draw a line between personal and professional relationships.

No favourites - Treating all children and their families equally sends a clear message that they are equally deserving of your time and attention. This also demonstrates to the child in your home that it is not okay to single out or favour one child - a scenario that can escalate the risks of harmful sexual behaviour.

Follow / unfollow - It is good practice to avoid connecting or following families on social media. Boundaries are difficult to manage on most social media platforms, and it is easy for educators to then be sharing photos, or commenting on posts from their families about matters not related to their professional role. At the same time, the children in your home are at an age where they are learning safety strategies for online use and will be influenced by you regarding what is and is not appropriate to share online, including images or information about the children in your care.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING SCENARIOS AGAINST THE BEHAVIOUR CONTINUUM.



1. Educator is 'friends' with the mother of a child in their care on Facebook. She comments on a photo of the child that his mum shared from a recent photo shoot. 'What a lovely shot of Jack!'
2. Fourteen-year-old son of the educator sees that she has commented on the photo and adds his own comment, 'Cute pic, Jack.'
3. Educator posts a photo of Jack eating spaghetti and pouring it on his head on Facebook and tags Jack's mum, 'Messy boy today! Watching him do this was hilarious.'
4. Fourteen-year-old son was home from school that day, so also watched Jack make a mess of his spaghetti. While the educator was preparing a cloth to clean him up, her son took some video footage of Jack rubbing spaghetti into his hair. He uploads the video onto TikTok with a filter and a song in the background.
5. The TikTok video gets quite a few hits, so a few days later the educator's son decides to get some more footage from Jack, including a video with him running down the hallway with no pants on.

RED BEHAVIOUR - TAKING AND/OR SHARING EXPLICIT IMAGES OR VIDEO FOOTAGE OF A CHILD

Professional boundaries are not just there to protect the children in your care. They also demonstrate what is okay and not okay to the children in your home.

Reduce the risk

EDUCATION

Educating yourself - As discussed earlier in this resource, educating yourself on harmful sexual behaviours - the what, why, who, where and when - is an important first step towards prevention.

Educating the children in your care - Educators are in a unique position to provide information while also demonstrating appropriate boundaries and behaviour with the children in their care. This can include information about safe and appropriate touch, body autonomy, safe people and relationships, what they should expect from the other people in the educator's household, and the physical spaces that are safe (as opposed to private) in an educator's home. Additionally, educating the children in your care about their right to feel safe and to have a voice is vital in creating an environment that is safe from harm and safe to speak up in. These messages can be shared via activities, demonstrations, books, games or online videos.

Educating the children in your home - The education a young person receives in relation to healthy and respectful relationships, consent and developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour is heavily dependent on what is being offered at school, what is being offered in the home, and what they can access online.

The level of age-appropriate sex education young people receive from their parents can vary significantly and can be influenced by the family's religious and cultural beliefs, the parents' own sex education growing up and their current knowledge and comfort with discussing it with their children.

Having access to honest, factual and age-appropriate information can assist a young person to navigate their own sexual identity and normalise many of the behaviours they are exhibiting. For more information on how to talk about sex with your children, check out the *Sexual Health* section of the [Better Health Victoria website](#) or the links provided at the end of this guide.

Regardless of whether the children in your home have received any sex education or not, it is your responsibility as the educator to provide clear and specific expectations regarding the way in which the children in your home

interact and behave with the children in your care. This includes, but is not limited to:

- exposure to inappropriate material via the TV, computer or phone
- taking photos, recordings or video
- touching a child physically in any way
- being alone with a child at any time
- rooms or spaces within the house or property where the children are and are not allowed to go
- locking doors to prevent children from entering private spaces
- changing nappies, toileting, bathing or dressing children.

It is recommended that you use a variety of methods to deliver this information to the children in your home and revisit these expectations with the children in their home on a regular basis, allowing them to ask questions and clarify specific information to ensure they understand the expectation.

This can include:

- an individual conversation
- a household / group conversation
- creating a rules or expectations list together that sits on the fridge and includes okay and not okay behaviours
- encouraging each person to speak up if they are not sure about a certain situation, have found themselves in a predicament that they shouldn't be in, or are concerned about actions or behaviours of another person in the home.

It is important they do not see this as 'dobbing' or have a fear of getting themselves or another person 'in trouble'. If there is a fear of retribution or consequences, they are less likely to speak up.

Recognise the red flags

If you are aware of the signs and indicators of harmful sexual behaviours you will be able to **recognise** these early. There may be indicators in the behaviour of the **children in your care** or the **children in your home**. You only need to have formed a **reasonable belief**.

WHAT IS A REASONABLE BELIEF?

Forming a reasonable belief is the process where you conclude that based on the information you have (red flags / indicators / suspicions / observations / resources, e.g. the Traffic Light System), you believe it is more **likely than not that something has occurred or may occur**.



WHAT IS A RED FLAG?

Red flags are indicators that something serious may be happening. They are not always 'evidence' that something has occurred.

You do not need evidence to prove that something has happened in order to report it. You just need to have formed a **reasonable belief**.

The trusted relationships you have built with the children in your care and the children in your home as an educator or as a parent / family member will assist you to notice the red flags that could be an indication of harmful sexual behaviours.

Remember, the flags aren't always red. Sometimes they are orange. These are just as important. The earlier we can recognise and respond to harmful sexual behaviours the earlier we can stop it or prevent it from escalating.

This is the best outcomes for both the child *engaging* in it, and the child *experiencing* it.



WHAT IS AN ORANGE FLAG?

Orange flags are the indicators that something is not right. It is not always easy to identify orange flags. Sometimes, on their own or in a certain context, a behaviour may be considered appropriate, but in a pattern, or a different context, it could be an orange flag.

It is important to trust your instinct, use the guides and resources and seek support when needed.

Recognise the red flags

Recognising when children are engaging in harmful sexual behaviours.



CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE

ORANGE BEHAVIOURS

- Excessively touching own genitals
- Using explicit or sexual language in play
- Drawing sexual or explicit images and artwork
- Pulling other children's clothes down
- Secretive behaviour

RED BEHAVIOURS

- Compulsive masturbation
- Simulating sexual touch or activity
- Persistent touching of genitals of others
- Sexual play including forceful penetration
- Any other sexual conduct



CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME

ORANGE BEHAVIOURS

- Being unsupervised in a room or space with a child when they clearly know it is not okay
- Giving gifts or special attention to a child
- Peeping or staring, particularly if a child is undressed
- Keeping secrets with a child
- Coercive or controlling or being strict or demanding of a child
- Making jokes with a child that relate to their genitalia or nudity

RED BEHAVIOURS

- Encouraging children to do sexual or inappropriate things with each other, even for a joke
- Openly or pretending to accidentally expose the victim to nudity or sexual material
- Physical contact with a child or young person directly such as tickling or kisses, or undertaking a task of a personal nature that they can do themselves, such as changing nappies or toileting
- Any form of sexual conduct with a child. This includes making sexual comments, asking unwarranted questions about their sexual experience, discussing your own sexual experience, unwarranted reference to sexual matters, showing a child or young person unwarranted sexual images

Recognise the red flags

Recognising when children are experiencing harmful sexual behaviours

The following table provides examples of indicators that may be telling us that a child is experiencing harmful sexual behaviours (from another child) or sexual abuse (from an adult).

PHYSICAL INDICATORS	EMOTIONAL INDICATORS	BEHAVIOURAL INDICATORS
<p>Itching, soreness, discharge or unexplained bleeding from the genital or anal area</p> <p>Torn, stained or bloodied underwear</p> <p>Recurrent urinary tract infections</p> <p>Unexplained pain in the genital area</p> <p>Bruises, scratches or other injuries around the genital area not consistent with accidental injury</p>	<p>Displaying low self-esteem</p> <p>Tending to be withdrawn, passive or tearful</p> <p>Displaying aggressive or demanding behaviour</p> <p>Being highly anxious</p> <p>Developmental delays</p>	<p>The child telling someone that sexual abuse has occurred</p> <p>Displaying sexual behaviour or knowledge that is unusual for the child's age</p> <p>Experiencing difficulties sleeping</p> <p>Regressed behaviour such as bed-wetting</p> <p>Fear of certain places (e.g. bedroom or bathroom)</p>

Child Matters, 2023; Better Health Channel, 2021

There are three different ways you may recognise a red flag.

1 A DISCLOSURE: When a child or young person tells you about an incident or incidents of harmful sexual behaviours that happened to them or that they were directly involved in.

'This happened to me' or 'I did this.'

2 AN ALLEGATION: When a child, young person or any other person tells you about an incident or incidents of harmful sexual behaviours that happened to someone else or that someone else was directly involved in.

'I saw them do it' or 'They told me it happened to them.'

3 A SUSPICION: When you have a reason to suspect an incident or incidents of abuse against a child or young person has occurred, based on observations in behaviours, your education on red flags and indicators of harmful sexual behaviours, and your instinct.

Respond and Report

When responding to a situation, it is crucial to approach it sensitively, appropriately and promptly, even if it involves your own child. You must also fulfill your obligations to report the concerns to parents, the service, and the authorities, as required.

IMPORTANT TIPS WHEN RESPONDING IN THE MOMENT

STOP AND REDIRECT.

If you witness harmful sexual behaviour occurring, it is imperative that you intervene immediately. Stop the behaviour and redirect all those involved. Ensure that you pause what you are doing and focus your attention on ensuring everyone's safety.

ACT, DON'T REACT.

Treat the behaviours as you would any other concerning behaviours, attempting to neutralise them, so you can focus on the necessary tasks and actions you need to take. It is important to remain calm as this will also help to neutralise the behaviour. This is challenging as your gut instinct might be to panic, feel angry or disgusted, or avoid the situation.

EMPATHISE, DON'T CATASTROPHISE.

Remember that they are still children and their ability to understand the significance of their behaviours can vary depending on their age and developmental capabilities. Catastrophising the situation by shouting, blaming them, or telling them they are wrong, awful or bad is only going to escalate things. Show compassion and empathy to ensure everyone is safe and supported.

REGULATE, DON'T INTERROGATE.

In this distressing situation, you may have several children experiencing distress - one due to what they have experienced and others due to their involvement or being caught. In order for them to remain calm, they will be

looking to you to co-regulate. This is the process where a child's nervous system learns to respond to the nervous system of the adults and others around them. If you are dysregulated, they will be too. Your ultimate goal right now is to help them stay calm. It is not time to investigate or interrogate those involved.

Just because you need to keep your cool right now does not mean you can't feel all of those natural feelings later. You should.

It is important to process what has happened for yourself. Seek support from your service or a professional service provided by them.

Self-care is vital in this moment as you are most likely going to have to continue to be a parent/family member or educator tomorrow.

Respond and Report

REPORTING THE HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR



CHILDREN IN YOUR CARE

If you identify harmful sexual behaviours between the **children in your care** you must:

Ensure immediate safety - Take immediate steps to make sure the children are safe (use the tips on the previous page).

Notify your FDC service - Inform them about the accusation or details of what was observed. Provide them with a clear account of what occurred or was disclosed, alongside any supporting information you have gathered.

Document the allegation / incident - Record the information clearly, objectively and factually on the incident, injury, illness and trauma form. Ensure that this information is stored securely and confidentially. Ensure you note the relevant details such as date, time, location and any statements or observations that were made.

Report to authorities - Contact the appropriate child protection authorities to report the observation/accusation, including if there are concerns about the safety of the child exhibiting the behaviours. They will guide you in the necessary steps to take and may initiate an investigation into the matter.

Notify your public liability insurer - Reach out for advice around claims and claim processes.

Seek legal advice - They will provide guidance on navigating the legal aspects of the case and will help you to understand your legal obligations, rights and responsibilities.

Support the child and their family - Offer support and assistance to the child who made the accusation or was involved in the incident. This may involve connecting them with appropriate counselling services or resources to support them through the process.

Seek professional support - As a FDC educator it is essential to seek professional support for yourself so you can address the emotional and financial impact it may have on you at the time.

Consider the risk - Determine if it is manageable or it requires an alternative care arrangement to be made.

Respond and Report

REPORTING THE HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR



CHILDREN IN YOUR HOME

If you identify harmful sexual behaviours of the children in your home you must:

Ensure immediate safety - Take immediate steps to make sure the children in your care are safe (use the tips on p. 22).

Ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child in your home - Separate them from the child in your care.

Notify your FDC service - Inform them immediately about the accusation or incident so you can get immediate support. Provide them with a clear account of the allegation or what occurred, alongside any supporting information you have gathered.

Document the allegation / incident - Record the information clearly, objectively and factually on the incident, injury, illness and trauma form. Ensure that this information is stored securely and confidentially. Ensure you note the relevant details such as date, time, location and any statements or observations that were made.

Report to authorities - Contact the appropriate child protection authorities to report the observation/accusation, including if there are concerns about the safety of the child exhibiting the behaviours. They will guide you in the necessary steps to take and may initiate an investigation into the matter.

Seek legal advice - Consult a legal professional to help you understand your legal obligations, rights and responsibilities in the situation. They can offer advice on the accusation or incident, whilst also providing guidance on your own child's involvement and how the accusation may impact you as a parent and an educator if charges are

made against your child.

Seek professional support - As a FDC educator it is essential to seek professional support for yourself so you can address the emotional and financial impact it may have on you at the time.

You may then need to:

- notify the parent or guardian of the other children involved
- arrange a meeting with the service and the family
- devise a safety plan and update the risk management plan with the service in line with the National Laws and Regulations
- seek professional support for you and the child in your home
- notify your public liability insurer

The FDC service may suspend a educator's service pending an investigation into the incident. The safety of all children involved is the priority.

Respond and Report

Children in your care may be at risk of sexual harm or abuse from other children in your care, or from children in your home.

If you have children in your home, this risk is higher.

Your role is to:

REDUCE THE RISK



Acknowledge that there is a risk of harmful sexual behaviours and it is your role to reduce this risk by **educating yourself** and **taking action**.

RECOGNISE THE RED FLAGS



Be **aware** of the signs and indicators of harmful sexual behaviours so you can **recognise** these early. There may be indicators in the behaviour of the **children in your care** or the **children in your home**.

RESPOND & REPORT



Respond to the situation **sensitively, appropriately and promptly**, even if it involves your child. Fulfill your obligations to report the concerns to parents, the service and the authorities as required.



Noticing and responding to risks or behaviours of your own children can be very confronting and distressing. Please always seek support to help you through this process.

For more information on support services visit the Raising Children website at raisingchildren.net.au

Useful resources & links

REDUCE THE RISK

Bravehearts - Harmful sexual behaviours (including peer-instigated abuse) - Article

[Report to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse - Assessing the different dimensions and degrees of risk of child sexual abuse in institutions](#)

Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)

[Problem sexual behaviours and sexually abusive behaviours in Australian children and young people](#)

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) - Information Sheets

[Requirements for Family Day Care Educators](#)

[Active Supervision: Ensuring Safety And Promoting Learning](#)

Lady Gowrie Tasmania - 'Children First' - Resource

[Gowrie Risk Assessment And Risk management in Family Day Care Tasmania.](#)

Child Abuse Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse - Final Report

[Volume 10: Children with harmful sexual behaviours](#)

Research in Practice - Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours - UK Research Review

[Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours](#)

RECOGNISE THE RED FLAGS

Victoria State Government - Department of Health - Better Health Channel - Article

[Sexual Health: Talking to children and young people about relationships, sex and sexuality](#)

[Recognising When a Child is at Risk](#)

Raising Children - The Australian Parenting Website - Article

[Sexual Development - Childhood sexual development and sexual behaviour: 7–9 years](#)

[Learning Difficulties and Learning Disorders: Children and Teenagers](#)

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) - Framework

[Developmental milestones and the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standards](#)

Victoria State Government - Child Protection in Early Childhood (PROTECT) - Article

[Identify Signs of Child Abuse](#)

Government of South Australia - Guideline

[Sexual Behaviour in Children And Young People](#)

Tasmanian Government - Department of Health - Practice Guide

[Child Safety and Wellbeing—Recognising the Signs of Harm to Children and Young People](#)

Child Matters Organisation (NZ) - Insights - Article

[Indicators of Child Abuse](#)

RESPOND AND REPORT

University of South Australia - Australian Centre for Child Protection - Issues Paper

[A Continuum of Responses for Harmful Sexual Behaviours](#)

NSW Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011 SI 653) - Legislation

[\(Subdivision 2 Education & Care National Regulations\)](#)

Department for Education South Australia - For Parents and Carers - Safety and Wellbeing - Guide

[Sexual behaviour in children and young people - information for parents and carers](#)

Raising Children Network

[Harmful sexual behaviour: supporting children and teenagers who have engaged in it](#)

Useful resources & links

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN ENGAGING IN HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

The Australian Parenting Website raisingchildren.net.au has an additional extensive list of state and territory-specific sexual harm support services that may assist educators and their families as required.

NATIONAL SERVICES AND HELPLINES

Blue Knot Foundation
[Blue Knot Helpline & Web Resources](#)

1300 657 380

Bravehearts
[Information Support Line](#)

1800 272 831

The Daniel Morcombe Foundation
[Bright Futures Program](#)

1300 326 435

1800RESPECT
[Confidential Information, Counselling and Support Service](#)

1800 737 732

QLD

True Relationships and Reproductive Health
[Information / Contact Request Form](#)

NSW

NSW Government – NSW Health
[Safe Wayz Program](#)

VIC

Centre Against Sexual Assault
[Crisis Counselling and Care](#)

(03) 5441 0430

Victorian Sexual Assault Crisis Line
[Available Supports](#) (includes multilingual information sheets)

1800 806 292

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