

Principles for Responding to harmful sexual behaviours

When a child or young person has engaged in harmful sexual behaviours towards another child or young person remember:

- The behaviour is functional and is serving a purpose;
- He/she must be “safe” in order for change to occur;
- The quality of your relationship is essential to the child/young person as they address their behaviours;
- Predictability, stability, consistency, structure, routines, pattern repetitive experiences;
- The best outcomes can occur when there is a co-ordinated response by all involved with young person and their family – Care Team approach.

Respond by:

- Intervening immediately if you witness the behaviour occurring;
- Address the child/young person in a calm, clear, non-blaming tone and language to ensure you don't increase shame (we know shame promotes denial and minimisation);
- Providing clear instructions to redirect the child/young person;
- Naming the behaviour and explaining why the behaviour is not okay
- Separating the 'behaviour' from the child/young person;
- Informing the child/young person that their interactions with other children/young people will be supervised to make sure they keep themselves and other safe;
- Explaining what will happen next – who you need to talk to, how you will support the child/young person, what action might occur;
- Helping the child/young person to develop support and strategies for at risk times;
- Let them know they can ask for help;
- Keep to established routines and structures as these will help the contain the child/young person within a predictable environment;
- Admit you don't have all the answers all the time but together, and with the help of other professionals we can work it out.

To reduce shame, when working with children and young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviours, ensure you **NEVER**:

- Discuss the behaviour with others openly
- Ignore, cover up or over react to behaviour
- Express your feelings about the behaviour to the young person – remain neutral
- Deal with the situation publicly
- Label child 'molester', 'sex offender', 'victim'
- Threaten the child/young person
- Make promises that can't be kept

If a child or young person discloses experiences of sexual abuse to you:

- Listen without judgement – whatever the child/young person did or did not do when they were experiencing sexual abuse was an adaptive response aimed towards surviving the experience;
- Control your shock response – the child/young person may feel deep shame or shut down if they think you cannot tolerate what they are telling you;
- Don't ask for further details as this may interfere with any subsequent Child Protection or Police investigation;
- Explain your role is to keep them safe;
- Tell them what you will do next – it is important that child/young person knows what you will do with the information they have given you;
- Seek support for yourself – the content of the disclosure is likely to be distressing and for you to be able to continue to support the child/young person you will need your own support.