Introduction

Work with children and young people who display behaviour that is sexually concerning or harmful is a primary means of child protection. By helping children and young people change their behaviour, other children and young people are protected. There is a need for specific services for young people displaying Sexually Harmful Behaviour (SHB) and increased resources to develop the work and increase the number of young people who can access therapeutic intervention. Currently not all young people displaying SHB are referred to a service. Before starting any intervention it is important to ensure the safety of children and young people who may be at risk. Children and young people referred to specialist services are likely to be children in need themselves and this work needs to be part of an overall child protection strategy.

Definition “Young people (under 18) who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a betrayal of trust” Palmer 1995

Language used

The terms Sexually Abusive Behaviour by young People and Juvenile Sexual Offenders are also used to describe young people with these behaviours but Sexually Harmful Behaviour is widely accepted by statutory agencies and services working directly as the preferred term to avoid labelling/stigma, to acknowledge developmental issues and the potential for change. Abuser assumes awareness of the action and an understanding that it was wrong. Offender refers to only a small number of young people who are convicted and does not include children under 10.

The Nature of Sexually Harmful Behaviour

Children and young people have been found to engage in a wide range of sexually harmful behaviours both contact (touching, masturbation, penetration) and non-contact (exhibitionism, obscene communication, voyeurism) behaviours. The overwhelming majority of all sexual abuse does not reach the criminal justice system.

Background

It is estimated that children and young people are responsible for about 1/3 of all sexual abuse against children (Grubin 1998, The Research Team 1990) this may be an under estimate due to low rates of reporting and even lower prosecution rates. Any effort to prevent child sexual abuse must address the problem of young people who display SHB. Over the last 10-15 years a significant amount has been learnt about SHB by children and young people but responses to the problem are still variable. Services are patchy, inconsistent, lack adequate resources and do not have a coordinated strategic approach. Veneziano & Veneziano (2002) found that of all adult sex offenders approximately half had committed their first offence as a juvenile with subsequent escalation in frequency and severity.

Characteristics of Young People presenting with SHB

- 92 % male
- Social skills deficits
- Lack of sexual knowledge
For some, the combination of low social competence, low self-esteem, emotional loneliness and feelings of sexual inadequacy can lead to problems in forming healthy relationships and resolving this through abusive interactions with children. Due to the range within this group of children and young people, it is vital to undertake individual assessment to tailor intervention to specific need. Studies across North America and UK suggest that young people displaying SHB have experienced many adversities in their lives and are not fundamentally different from other young people in trouble and in need.

Understanding Younger Children
If a child’s healthy sexual development is disturbed or disrupted either through abuse or living in a sexualised environment it may cause them to develop sexually problematic behaviours for example:

- Through sexual abuse children’s bodies become sexualised and they may experience sexual feelings; this traumatic sexualisation can lead to sexually reactive behaviour
- Living in a highly sexualised environment with few boundaries where a child is exposed to sexual behaviour beyond their natural development
- They may have experienced violent, chaotic family backgrounds with little warmth or empathy where sex is routinely paired with aggression
- The younger the child presenting with serious sexual behaviours the more likely they have been abused or been exposed to sexual activity.

Why is Intervention Important?

- Protection of victims and preventing further abuse – victims’ interests are paramount
- Sexual abuse is a crime and cannot be ignored
- If not addressed SHB can escalate rather than simply stop
- SHB is very damaging to victims – even at a low level
- High success rates – few will re-offend after treatment
- These are children and young people first – work should not be only offence focused
- Young people are still developing, physically, psychologically and their own personality. Therefore there is a real opportunity to divert young people away from SHB. Distorted thinking is less developed/entrenched
- The behaviour is less fixed and ingrained and therefore more potential for change so they can learn to control their sexual behaviour and take responsibility
- Young people tend to have poor sexual knowledge and lack of awareness of seriousness and impact
- Role of family is more critical

Key Research Findings:

- Many children and young people who present with SHB have histories of multiple abuse and disadvantage and have come to the attention of child welfare agencies before the SHB emerged.
- Younger children presenting with harmful sexual behaviours are often extremely vulnerable and likely to have been extensively sexually abused themselves. Sometimes they re-enact abuse they experienced directly and they should be responded to appropriately as victims and sexually reactive children
- Early adolescence particularly onset of puberty appears to be a peak time for developing SHB. Most are male although knowledge is emerging about small numbers of females whose sexual behaviours are harmful.
- Adolescents with SHB share many characteristics with other young people who have a wide range of difficulties. It is important to address their wider problems as well as the SHB and to remember that they are young people first and “sex offenders” second
- Young People with learning disabilities who display SHB are a particularly vulnerable and neglected group and may need specialist support
Research shows that targeted interventions can be highly effective in reducing risk even for those children and young people at higher risk of re-offending (Riighthand & Welch 2001, Veneziano & Veneziano 2002)

Many parents whose children display SHB are lonely, isolated; often facing stigma, rejection and hostility in reaction to their child’s behaviour. Research suggests strongly that involving parents in work is vital to the success of SHB interventions.

Intervention with this group of children and young people should be
(a) Holistic; focusing on the children’s needs across all dimensions of their lives and development
(b) Systemic; involving families and parents in order to improve the children’s social environments, attachments and relationships
(c) Goal-specific; designed to address specific issues relating to the child’s harmful sexual behaviours

Child Protection Principles
Sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people must be recognised as harmful to both the victim and the child who abuses. A significant proportion of children who abuse may have been abused themselves. While the numbers who engage in this kind of sexually harmful behaviour are relatively small, particular concern remains about the increasingly younger age of the children engaged in it and the number and range of victims which can include adults.

Principle underpinning work with SHB
- Welfare of the victim must always be paramount

Sexually harmful behaviour (SHB) when identified in children must be taken seriously by all agencies. It is important to distinguish between experimental behaviours and exploitative and harmful behaviours. It is therefore necessary to consider the following:
- Consent (including age and level of understanding)
- Equality
- Authority & control
- Cooperation
- Compliance
- Criminal offences

There are 3 services in NI dedicated to working with young people displaying SHB and their families; The NSPCC Interlink Project, the NHSCRT Making Changes Project and Barnardos Young Person Therapeutic Service.

Parents and Carers
The support of young peoples’ families is vital to the success of the work. A great deal of progress can be achieved through working with parents and carers. It is a difficult issue for parents and carers to come to terms with and takes time to fully understand.

Initial Responses - responsibilities of all individuals/agencies
Sexual behaviour like any behaviour should be handled calmly and firmly. If you become aware of an incident of SHB
- Stop the behaviour- remove the child or young person away from others and speak to them
- Describe the behaviour accurately to avoid any misunderstanding e.g. “You pulled John’s pants down, she was embarrassed and upset!” “You grabbed Anne’s breast, you embarrassed and hurt her! No one should be touched on their private parts without consent”
- Report the incident to the identified lead person e.g. child protection officer and include both the young person’s and victim’s responses if known
- Record the incident being as specific as possible about what was seen and heard
- Send the record to the identified lead person who must decide on the level of concern, referral to social services, contacting parents and PSNI
Key Issues:
Any work with young people who have committed sexual offences requires an inter-agency accountable approach to protecting the public while, at the same time, dealing with young people in a consistent way, maximising the opportunity to assist them in challenging and changing their behaviour. Any such approach necessitates:
· A recognition that young people who have committed sexual offences differ significantly from adults who have committed sexual offences;
· A multi-agency approach that is systematic, consistent, co-operative and fair;
· A multi-agency assessment of the young person which should occur before any management plans are made;
· Management of the young person which begins with a decision about the appropriateness of bringing them within the criminal justice system; and
· The provision of intervention to minimise the risks posed to past/potential victims whether or not the young person is subject to the criminal justice system.

There are positive outcomes for working with Young People at their stage of development and it is important that work is child centred and responds in a holistic way that ensures their needs are met

Sources/References
• ACPC Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures 2005
• AIM Guidelines (Carol Carson) 2007
• An Investigation into the Application of Child Protection Procedures with Children and Young People who Display Sexually Harmful Behaviour. Risky Children NI Research (DHSSPS Unpublished) 2006
• Childs Play: Preventing abuse among children and young people. Stop It Now
• The Research Team (1990) Child Sexual Abuse in NI. Antrim, NI Greystone
• Working Together for Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours (2005) A Barnardo’s Briefing for Professionals by Simon Hackett and Sara Scott. Produced in conjunction with JRF

Useful Numbers
PPANI STRATEGY & ADMINISTRATION UNIT 028 90259612
NSPCC NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION HELPLINE Freephone 0808 800 5000
POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND 02890 650222
STOP IT NOW! (NI) – Working to prevent sexual abuse. If you have concerns about your own thoughts and behaviours towards children or are concerned about others contact the Stop it Now Helpline on:
Youth Justice Agency 028903 316418

For further information on NOTA please visit: www.nota.co.uk