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# Harmful Behaviours

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When developing the Online Resilience Tool, we decided to split the activities young people engage in online into 3 categories: Harmful, Potentially Harmful and Not Harmful.

But what does Harmful mean? And what should you do if you recognise a Harmful behaviour? This article will explain the categories with examples to help you understand.

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## **What does harmful mean?**

Harmful means that what the young person is doing could cause harm to themselves or someone else. In terms of safeguarding young people, harmful is often the term used to explain why young people's confidentiality must be broken, why the MARU may be called and why some form of intervention is needed.

In terms of the Online Resilience Tool, the term Harmful doesn't mean that an immediate referral to the MARU is the only course of action, but it does mean something must be done.

There's a longer description of what Harmful means on page 3 of the tool. But for now, let's go through some examples of Harmful Behaviours to look at what might be done.

## Examples of Harmful Behaviours

### **0-5 Age group - Sexual or Violent Language.**

If you were supporting a family and a child of 3 or 4 came into the room and swore, made aggressive gestures and punched or kicked when they didn't get their own way, you would expect a parent or carer to intervene. In much the same way, if a child used very violent language, we would expect a reprimand. If the parent/carer doesn't react or respond to this behaviour, the appropriate intervention may be to explain the necessity of doing so. You might model how they could tell the child that the language they've used isn't acceptable. If the language is particularly explicit - for example if they are describing sexual or violent acts that a child that age would not be expected to have knowledge of, further investigation may be needed and you should discuss this with your safeguarding lead.

### **6-8 Age group - Sexualised Posing**

Sexualised posing would be something that would be considered unusual for a child this age to have seen. Pouting/blowing kisses wouldn't be a problem, nor would silly poses to get a reaction - a child pulling their pants down would need to be told to stop, but this wouldn't be a bigger cause for concern. You should discuss sexualised posing with your safeguarding lead immediately as there may be other concerning behaviours.

### **9-12 Age group - Requesting Images to be airbrushed**

With this sort of behaviour, it may be that a parent/carer or even another child comes to you with concerns, or the child may directly ask you to airbrush pictures of them. As a minimum, a discussion should be had with the child and the parents/carers about how to support the child's positive body image. This behaviour alone is unlikely to need a safeguarding referral, but without support the young person is likely to experience low self-esteem which could develop into mental health issues.

### **13-15 Age group - Disrupted sleep through device dependence/gaming**

If you are supporting a young person and they tell you they didn't sleep last night because they were up all night gaming, you would naturally have a conversation with them about the harms of doing so. If you find that they are always tired, or they tell you that they stay up late every night to play games or scroll through social media, you might need to take further action. This might include talking to their parents about what they can do, for example, moving a games console out of the young person's bedroom, the whole family leaving devices downstairs at bedtime, or rewarding time spent away from devices. You might want to talk to your manager/safeguarding lead about how best to support the family, but a MARU referral is unlikely to be needed.

### **16-18 Age group - Accessing pro-self harm/suicide sites**

This behaviour shows a clear risk of harm. The young person may be feeling depressed or suicidal, they might be actively self-harming or considering doing so. You will need to talk to the young person about how they're feeling and what support they might need. You should discuss this with your manager or safeguarding lead and you may need to look into a referral to CAMHS. This behaviour should be taken as seriously as the young person telling you they have been self-harming or thinking about suicide. It's possible they looked at these sites out of curiosity alone, but you should not assume this is the case.

# Harmful Behaviours

Hopefully looking at the range of interventions listed here you can see how for some behaviours listed as Harmful, a minor intervention with the young person and their family will suffice, whereas others will require you to get advice from your safeguarding lead or the MARU.

You'll also see that the fact that these behaviours are connected to online activities does not mean you need to know all about the apps or games that young people are using in order to recognise a safeguarding concern. Remember: as a professional working with children and young people, you know about risk, and it's risk that we need to react to.

If you want to know more, we've got a podcast all about Harmful behaviours (or a short one if you don't have that much time), just click on Digital Podcasts under the Digital Resilience menu.

