

# Sexual Development, Boundaries & Consent

## A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners

### Purpose:

This practitioner tool is designed to support foster and kinship carer practitioners in engaging carers with deeper understanding, reflection, and application of knowledge related to sexual development, boundaries, consent, and online safety. It is aligned with trauma-informed care principles and the Statement of Standards (Child Protection Act 1999, QLD), promoting safe, respectful, and developmentally appropriate care.

## Understanding Sexual Development

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Sexual development is a lifelong process influenced by biology, trauma, culture, identity, and individual experience (Hackett, 2014). Children in care may display sexual behaviours that are shaped by disrupted attachments, early exposure to inappropriate material, or experiences of harm.



### Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to understand the difference between developmentally typical behaviours and those that are concerning or harmful. Use frameworks such as the Traffic Light Tool (True Relationships & Reproductive Health, 2023) to assess and respond.

- ✔ Age-appropriate, mutual, and spontaneous behaviours
- ? May be concerning; requires monitoring, education, and support
  - ⚠ Coercive, aggressive, secretive, or developmentally inappropriate; requires immediate intervention

### ◆ Reflection Questions:

- How do you currently support carers to distinguish between age-appropriate and concerning sexual behaviours?
- How might cultural background, disability, or trauma history influence a child's sexual development?
- How confident are your carers in responding calmly and without shame to a child's curiosity or behaviour?

### Relevant Statement of Standards:

Standards a, b, c, e, g, h, k

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## Boundaries Within the Home

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Children with histories of trauma often struggle with boundaries due to disrupted attachment and inconsistent caregiving. Ecological and attachment theories emphasise the importance of safe, structured environments where rules are predictable and developmentally appropriate (Barter & Berridge, 2011; Bowlby, 1988). Boundaries teach children that their bodies and privacy are respected.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Explore how carers communicate boundaries about privacy, nudity, and physical contact. Promote co-creation of house expectations with children and use strategies that support learning, such as visual aids and social stories. Avoid punitive or shaming responses when boundaries are breached.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do carers teach and model respectful touch and personal space?
- What happens when children with different trauma histories live in the same household?
- Are boundaries inclusive of neurodivergent or culturally diverse expressions of privacy?

## Open Conversations & Reducing Shame

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Shame is a known barrier to disclosure and can reinforce secrecy or risk-taking (Wamser-Nanney & Campbell, 2020).

Trauma-informed approaches emphasise safety, empowerment, and connection. Language is a powerful tool for shaping a child's self-worth and understanding of their body.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to become comfortable with open, age-appropriate language. Encourage ongoing rather than one-off conversations. Help carers reflect on how their own upbringing may influence their comfort with these topics.

### Reflection Questions:

- How does the carer respond to behaviours like self-touch or curiosity about periods or erections?
- Are questions met with praise and curiosity or discomfort and avoidance?
- What scripts or examples can be offered to reduce shame in everyday moments?

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## Online Safety & Technology

### **Theory and Practice Knowledge:**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights the growing influence of digital environments.

For children in care, technology can be both empowering and dangerous. Children who have been sexually harmed may be more vulnerable to grooming, sextortion, and exposure to adult content (Hollis & Belton, 2023).

### **Practitioner Guidance:**

Equip carers with resources and confidence to talk openly about online risks. Promote a balance between supervision, education, and trust-building. Support carers to include children in setting digital rules that evolve with age and development.

### **Reflection Questions:**

- What systems are in place for monitoring, checking privacy settings, or reporting issues?
- How do carers respond when children disclose online harm?
- Are children encouraged to share their online experiences without fear of punishment?

## Open Conversations & Reducing Shame

### **Theory and Practice Knowledge:**

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) requires careful, non-punitive, evidence-informed responses.

Letourneau et al. (2017) and Hackett (2014) advocate for early intervention, therapeutic responses, and avoiding labelling children. The Traffic Light Framework and the Layered Continuum support practitioners in guiding carers through risk assessment and support planning.

### **Practitioner Guidance:**

Guide carers to document objectively, stay calm, and avoid shame-based responses. Create a support plan involving therapeutic services, family support workers, and specialist resources such as Bravehearts' Turning Corners program. Reinforce that carers are not alone in responding to complex behaviours.


### **Reflection Questions:**

- Do carers feel confident identifying red, orange, or green behaviours?
- How do they manage their own emotional response?
- What safety plans are in place for multi-child households?

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### Specialist Resources & Further Reading:

- Bravehearts:  
<https://bravehearts.org.au>
- ThinkUKnow:  
<https://www.thinkuknow.org.au>
- ACCCE: <https://www.accce.gov.au>
- eSafety Commissioner:  
<https://www.esafety.gov.au>
- QLD Child Safety Practice Manual:  
<https://cspm.csyw.qld.gov.au>
- [Berry Street](#)
-  Recommended Reading:
- Hackett, S. (2014). Children and Young People with Harmful Sexual Behaviours
- Bromfield & Paton (2024). Layered Continuum
- Letourneau, E. (2017). Evidence-Based HSB Interventions
- Wamser-Nanney, S. (2020). Shame and Sexual Behaviour in Trauma-Affected Children
- Barter & Berridge (2011). Peer Violence and Marginalisation in Residential Care
- Hollis & Belton (2023). Technology-Assisted Sexual Harm in Vulnerable Youth

### Self-Care Reminder for Practitioners

Supporting carers and children around sensitive topics such as sexual development and harmful sexual behaviour can be emotionally demanding. It is important to regularly check in with your own wellbeing and recognise when you may need to pause, reflect, or access support.


### Remember:

- You are not alone.
- Complex practice requires a team approach.
- It is okay to feel challenged—these are sensitive topics.
- Reflective supervision is a space to process, grow, and seek guidance.
- Professional boundaries and emotional safety are part of ethical practice.

### Support Options:

- Internal reflective supervision
- Peer consultation groups
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Trauma-informed counsellors or wellbeing coaches



 You can only have safe, open conversations about bodies, boundaries and consent when you feel steady and supported yourself. Preparing and resourcing yourself isn't optional — it's what creates safety for children and young people.