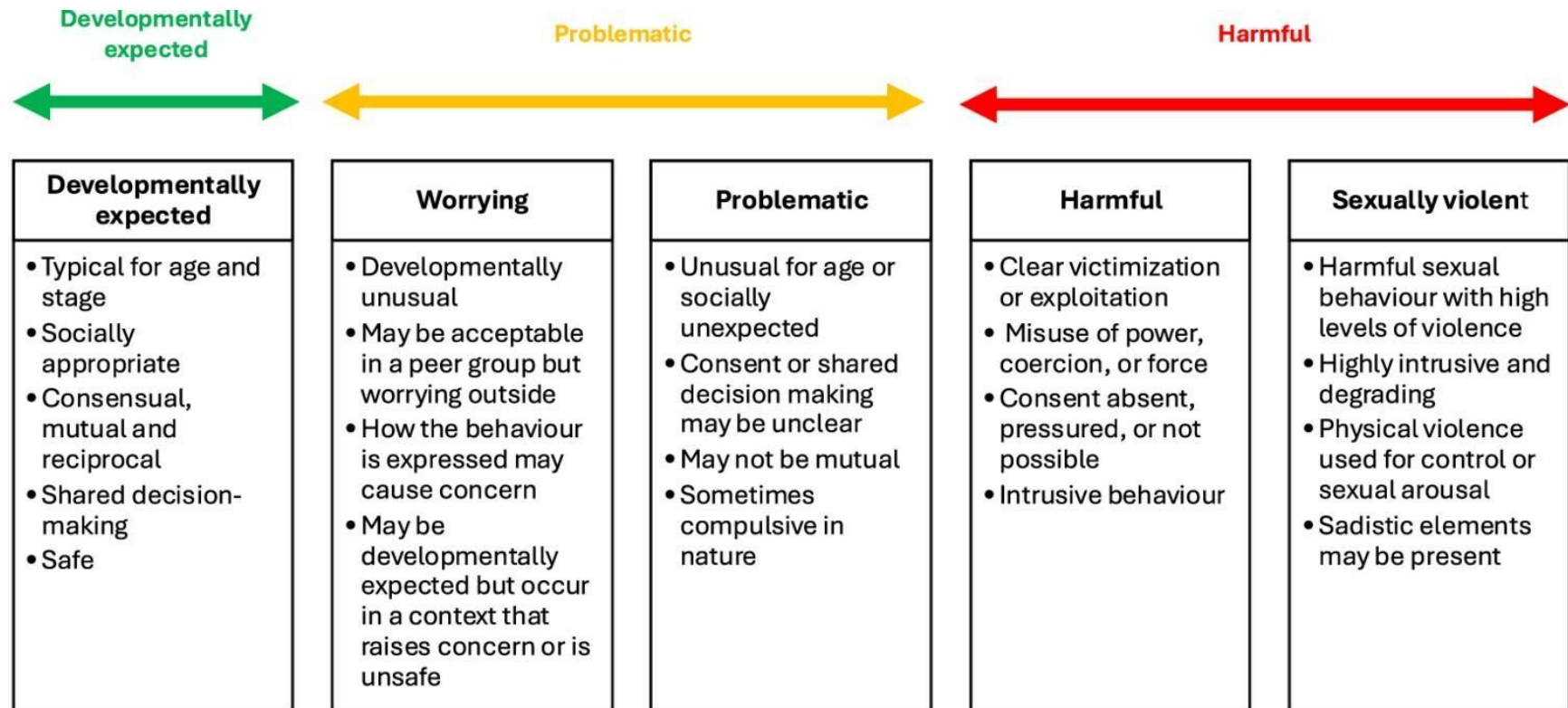


The following is excerpted directly from:

[The Hackett continuum revised: a developmentally and contextually informed framework for children's sexual behaviour by Simon Hackett](#)



Developmental and contextual lens across all strands:

Child/development: age and developmental capacity · neurodevelopmental profile · understanding

Relationship/context: consent and reciprocity · equality and power · relational and peer context · culture, gender and identity · digital context · location

Pattern/impact: frequency and persistence · emotional tone · intrusiveness · impact, harm and safety

5.1. The architecture of the revised continuum

As shown, the revised Continuum brings together two complementary levels of organisation: three overarching categories of sexual behaviour and five more detailed descriptive strands. The categories provide a high-level developmental taxonomy intended to bring definitional clarity and support consistent early decision-making, while the strands offer a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of behaviour. This dual structure preserves the conceptual richness of the original model while offering clearer scaffolding for practice.

The revised architecture is organised around two linked questions. The first is developmental and contextual: how should the behaviour be understood in relation to the child's age, developmental capacity, neurodevelopmental profile, relational understanding, culture, peer context, digital environment and wider ecology? The second is safeguarding-oriented: what level of concern, support, protection or specialist intervention is required in response? These questions are deliberately connected. A behaviour cannot be understood developmentally without considering context and a response cannot be proportionate unless it is grounded in both developmental meaning and actual or likely impact. Figure 2 therefore makes explicit that the strands are to be read through a developmental and contextual lens, rather than as behaviour-based categories to be applied by surface form alone.

Crucially, as with the original Continuum, the five strands are not intended to represent fixed categories or formal diagnostic thresholds. They are overlapping developmental descriptors that support practitioners in considering the meaning of behaviour in context, including age, developmental stage, relational dynamics, power, consent, emotional state and ecological conditions. The three categories, meanwhile, provide an overarching framework that reflects how systems and practitioners typically need to triage sexual behaviour in order to inform an initial response. Neither level of the model should be interpreted in isolation: the strands bring nuance to the categories, and the categories give structure and clarity to the strands. The developmental and contextual lens shown in Figure 2 is intended to make this interpretive requirement visible within the model itself.

This architecture also applies to digitally mediated behaviours. Online sexualised communication, image-sharing, pornography exposure, online coercion, digitally facilitated peer pressure and technology-assisted exploitation should not be treated as sitting outside the Continuum or requiring a separate conceptual model. Rather, they require the same developmental and contextual analysis as in-person behaviours, while also attending to the specific affordances of digital

environments, including persistence, visibility, anonymity, speed of dissemination, peer amplification and difficulties in containment. Digitally mediated behaviours may therefore be developmentally expected, worrying, problematic, harmful or sexually violent, depending on the child's understanding, consent, reciprocity, power dynamics, coercion, impact and context.

By integrating these two levels across both offline and digitally mediated contexts, the revised Continuum offers a coherent, developmentally anchored framework that aligns with contemporary safeguarding practice, children's rights principles and emerging international terminology. It provides a conceptual foundation for interpreting sexual behaviour in childhood while supporting proportionate, contextually informed and reflective professional judgement.

5.2. The five strands of the revised continuum

The first version of the Continuum presented only the model as an overall figure, without detailed explanations of the strands within it, leaving users to infer distinctions largely from experience or local guidance. For this reason, I include an expanded rationale and descriptor of the revised strands here to support consistent interpretation, reduce ambiguity and strengthen reflective practice. These elaborations are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive; rather, they are offered in order to provide practitioners with a clearer conceptual foundation for making sense of children's sexual behaviours in developmentally, relationally and contextually informed ways.

5.2.1. Strand 1: developmentally expected sexual behaviour

This strand refers to behaviours that fall within the broad range of what may occur across typical childhood and adolescent development. Empirical studies and developmental reviews indicate that sexual curiosity, body exploration and some sexual behaviours are reported across childhood and adolescence, but that their meaning depends on age, developmental stage, frequency, relational context, consent, reciprocity, emotional tone and impact (Friedrich et al., [Citation1998](#); Friedrich et al., [Citation2001](#); Kellogg & Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, [Citation2009](#); Larsson & Svedin, [Citation2001](#); Tolman & McClelland, [Citation2011](#); Wurtele & Kenny, [Citation2011](#)).

“Developmentally expected” behaviours are age-, stage – and developmentally congruent, reflecting children's emerging curiosity about bodies, relationships and their gradually increasing interest in sex, sexuality and intimacy into adolescence. They are mutual, consensual and reciprocal, occurring between children of similar age, size, developmental

stage and social power. They typically take place in contexts where supervision, trust, privacy, boundaries and balanced power are present. In younger children, these behaviours are usually spontaneous, transitory and responsive to adult guidance; children will stop when redirected and the behaviours typically do not involve distress or fixation. As children move into early adolescence, developmentally expected behaviour may include an increasing interest in sexuality, exploratory interactions with peers, and the use of digital spaces as part of normative identity formation (Döring, [Citation2014](#); Dully et al., [Citation2023](#)). For older adolescents, developmentally expected behaviour may also include consensual sexual activity within respectful and safe relationships, reflecting increasing autonomy and maturity. Across all ages, these behaviours do not cause harm to self or others and occur within contexts where boundaries are understood and respected.

The bullet points within this strand therefore capture these core features: typical for age and stage, socially appropriate, mutual, consensual and reciprocal, involving shared decision-making, and occurring in safe contexts.

Importantly, “developmentally expected” does not imply that all children at a particular age will express these behaviours, nor that their absence indicates any developmental concern. Rather, it means that such behaviours fall within the spectrum of what may occur during typical development for children with similar developmental profiles. Comparisons should therefore be made with children of similar age, ability, stage of development, neurodevelopmental profile, cultural context and lived experience – not simply those in geographical or educational proximity. For example, a child with an intellectual disability should be compared to peers with comparable developmental characteristics, and a young LGBTQ + person should be understood in relation to other young people who share similar identities and contexts. This principle helps prevent misinterpretation, adultification and inappropriate pathologisation of difference.

When behaviours fall within this strand, they primarily call for support, guidance, education and boundary-setting to ensure the ongoing safety and wellbeing of those involved, rather than formal intervention or safeguarding responses.

5.2.2. Strand 2: worrying sexual behaviour

“Worrying sexual behaviour” refers to behaviours that do not fall neatly within developmentally expected patterns but do not indicate coercion or harm. Such behaviours may nonetheless have an impact on others, for example by creating discomfort, confusion or concern among peers, carers or professionals. However, where behaviour is best understood as

worrying rather than problematic or harmful, this impact is usually limited, situational and non-coercive, and there is no clear indication of intentional or significant harm. This distinction is consistent with research and clinical guidance indicating that sexual behaviours become a cause for concern not simply because of their surface form, but because of their developmental fit, frequency, persistence, emotional tone, relational context, coerciveness, impact and association with wider child or family vulnerabilities (Chaffin et al., [Citation2008](#); Silovsky & Niec, [Citation2002](#)).

The bullet points for this strand emphasise four themes: behaviours that are developmentally unusual; behaviours that might be acceptable in peer contexts but concerning in others; behaviours expressed in a manner that causes concern; and developmentally expected behaviours occurring in contexts that raise concern or are unsafe. These features position the “worrying” strand as a prompt to pay attention to what might be going on for a child, signalling the potential need for additional guidance, support or closer observation.

Worrying behaviours often prompt practitioner uncertainty precisely because they can resemble developmentally expected behaviours but differ in frequency, context, intensity, or emotional tone. For instance, behaviours that are developmentally expected for a child’s stage (such as curiosity about bodies) may become worrying when expressed repeatedly, impulsively, or in situations that lack safety or supervision. Similarly, behaviour that is socially acceptable within a peer culture, such as joking, flirtation or sexualised talk, may be concerning when directed towards younger children, vulnerable peers or adults. A child may also express behaviours with an emotional quality (e.g. anxiety, secrecy, distress, dysregulation) that signals underlying difficulties. These subtleties mean that worrying behaviour should be interpreted not simply according to its surface form but through a developmental, relational and ecological lens.

Behaviours in this strand may or may not reflect underlying vulnerabilities. Children who struggle with emotional regulation, social communication or impulse control may express sexual behaviours in ways that appear unusual or inappropriate without intending harm. Worrying behaviour can also occur when children lack adequate supervision, experience stress or instability, or have been exposed to sexual material, peer pressures or environments that they cannot fully understand or navigate.

The “worrying” strand should therefore be understood as an invitation to explore meaning, context and need. It highlights that something about the behaviour – or its context – requires attention, support or clarification. Crucially, it does not imply pathology, a likely pathway of progression, or inevitable escalation. Responses at this level should focus on understanding

the child's developmental stage, relational context and emotional needs; supporting carers to reinforce boundaries and provide supervision; and helping the child develop social understanding and emotional literacy. Providing proportionate support at this stage aims to meet need and avoids unnecessary stigma or intrusive safeguarding responses.

In this way, the worrying strand functions as a reflective space between developmentally expected behaviours and those that might require more structured professional responses.

5.2.3. Strand 3: problematic sexual behaviour

“Problematic sexual behaviour” refers to behaviours that fall more clearly outside developmentally expected patterns and that raise a higher level of concern because of their persistence, intrusiveness, context, relational dynamics or impact. The bullet points in this strand capture key features: behaviours that are unusual for a child's age or socially unexpected; situations where consent or shared decision-making is unclear or uncertain; behaviours that may not be mutual; and behaviours that appear compulsive or difficult for the child to regulate. These dimensions reflect a shift from the uncertainty of the “worrying” strand towards clearer indications that the behaviour may be signalling unmet need, developmental difficulties or distress, without implying inevitability of progression into harmful behaviour.

This use of “problematic” is consistent with developmental and contextual approaches which recognise that some sexual behaviours by children and adolescents may be intrusive, persistent, poorly regulated or developmentally incongruent without necessarily involving coercion, exploitation or abusive intent, and that such behaviours are often best understood in relation to wider emotional, behavioural, family and ecological vulnerabilities (Chaffin et al., [Citation2008](#); McPherson et al., [Citation2024](#)).

Children whose behaviour falls within this strand may be more likely to struggle with emotional regulation, impulse control, perspective-taking, or understanding social boundaries. They may act in ways that appear intrusive, confusing or difficult for peers to respond to, not because of malice, but because of developmental immaturity, past experiences, cultural or gender related differences, or difficulties in reading social cues. Some problematic behaviours arise from exposure to sexual material or environments that exceed a child's developmental capacity to process them; others reflect attempts to cope with stress, anxiety or trauma. Compulsive or repetitive elements may suggest that the behaviour serves a self-soothing or tension-reducing function, or that it has become habitual in the absence of appropriate guidance or

boundaries. In some cases, problematic behaviour may be socially inappropriate or embarrassing for the child, leading to shame, isolation or peer rejection if unaddressed.

Problematic sexual behaviour does not imply coercion, exploitation or significant harm of the kind that characterises the harmful strand. However, problematic behaviour may cause distress to others, or create disruptions in peer, family or school settings. For example, peers may feel uncomfortable, confused or may experience boundary breaches even where there is no intent to harm. Because problematic behaviours often occur in relational or ecological contexts characterised by unmet needs, instability or stress, responses should focus on understanding the drivers behind the behaviour and supporting the child holistically.

This strand therefore calls for a proportionate response that may include an assessment of general wellbeing and need (but not a specialist HSB assessment), support for parents or carers, targeted educative or low-level therapeutic intervention, and increased supervision or guidance in key environments such as school, home or online. Practitioners should aim to understand the developmental meaning of the behaviour, identify any contextual or relational factors contributing to it, and help the child develop alternatives that meet their emotional or social needs in safer ways. Addressing problematic behaviours at this stage can help stabilise the child's environment and reduce the likelihood of further difficulty, while avoiding punitive or stigmatising responses that may exacerbate underlying vulnerabilities.

5.2.4. Strand 4: harmful sexual behaviour

“Harmful sexual behaviour” refers to actions that cause harm, attempt to cause harm, or are likely to cause harm to another person or to the child themselves. Harm here is understood not simply as subjective upset, but as actual or likely violation, exploitation, coercion, fear, injury, significant distress, or impairment of another person's safety, dignity or autonomy. The bullet points in this strand highlight defining features: victimisation or exploitation, misuse of power, coercion or force, absence or impossibility of consent, and intrusive behaviour. These are not behaviours that merely raise concern or signal unmet needs; they involve violation, coercion or exploitation that has a discernible impact on another person's safety or wellbeing, placing such behaviour firmly within safeguarding and protection processes. The presence of clear power imbalance – physical, emotional, cognitive, gendered, relational or situational – is often central. Behaviour in this strand may leave another child frightened, confused, distressed, or disempowered, whether or not physical force is

used, and whether or not the child displaying the behaviour fully understands the meaning or consequences of their actions.

This understanding is consistent with established definitions and reviews of HSB which identify developmentally abusive or harmful sexual behaviours by under-18s as requiring attention to power imbalance, coercion, consent, victim impact, developmental capacity and safeguarding context (Hackett et al., [Citation2019](#); McPherson et al., [Citation2024](#)).

While HSB involves violation, exploitation or coercion, it is crucial to maintain a developmental perspective. This developmental caution is important because research consistently indicates that children and adolescents who display sexually abusive behaviour are heterogeneous and should not be understood simply through adult-offender models or treated as though their behaviour reflects fixed sexual dangerousness (Letourneau & Borduin, [Citation2008](#); McPherson et al., [Citation2024](#); Seto & Lalumière, [Citation2010](#)).

Children displaying harmful behaviour remain children, with histories, vulnerabilities and developmental capacities that differ markedly from adults who use sexual violence. Harmful behaviour may arise in the context of trauma, neglect, disrupted caregiving, exposure to violence, constrained environments, developmental disability, peer vulnerability, social power imbalances or unsafe digital ecologies that amplify opportunity. In many cases, children may not fully understand concepts such as consent, bodily autonomy, or the impact of their behaviour on others; however, the effect of the behaviour may nonetheless be harmful, and the behaviour must be recognised as such.

Harmful sexual behaviour differs from *problematic* behaviour in both impact and relational dynamics. Where problematic behaviours may be intrusive or confusing, harmful behaviours cross clear boundaries and create tangible risks to safety and wellbeing. These behaviours may involve pressuring, manipulating or exploiting another child; persuading them into sexual activity they do not understand; or taking advantage of a power imbalance created by age, development, physical size, emotional maturity, or access to resources or information. Some harmful behaviours occur online, where anonymity, secrecy or digital disinhibition can heighten coercion or exploitation.

Because HSB involves actual or likely harm, it requires a protective response. However, the response should remain proportionate, developmentally grounded and rights-respecting. Children displaying harmful behaviour must not be treated as offenders or adult-like perpetrators; nor should they be subject to punitive interventions that overlook their

developmental needs. Instead, responses should integrate safeguarding for those harmed with support, assessment and therapeutic input for the child responsible. Understanding the ecological, developmental and relational drivers of the behaviour is essential to preventing further harm and supporting positive change.

The harmful strand therefore marks a clear conceptual shift within the continuum: from behaviours that call for guidance (worrying) or more structured support (problematic) to behaviours that are likely to require both more formal HSB assessment and safeguarding intervention. It distinguishes behaviours that cause distress, fear or violation from those reflecting confusion, immaturity or unmet need. In doing so, it anchors the continuum's commitment to proportionate, developmental and non-stigmatising responses, while ensuring that the seriousness of the behaviour and its impact on those harmed is fully recognised.

5.2.5. Strand 5: sexually violent behaviour

Sexually violent behaviour represents the most severe and intrusive end of the Continuum. The bullet points in this strand identify behaviours characterised by high levels of overt violence, physical force used for control or sexual arousal, extreme intrusiveness, and in some cases sadistic elements. These behaviours are distinct not only in their impact, but in the degree of aggression, coercion or domination involved. While harmful behaviour involves violation, exploitation or coercion, sexually violent behaviour is differentiated by the use or threat of physical violence, the deliberate infliction of fear or pain, or the presence of behaviours that are degrading, humiliating or physically dangerous. Although the term “violence” can feel uncomfortable when applied to children, this strand is included here to capture those behaviours where explicit force or aggression is central, beyond the inherent violation present in all sexual abuse. Although rare, these behaviours demand serious attention because they place others at acute risk of harm, signal the need for intensive assessment and coordinated multi-agency support.

This strand should be understood as referring to a small, high-concern subgroup rather than to adolescents who display HSB more generally: meta-analytic and longitudinal research indicates that most young people who sexually offend do not continue into persistent sexual offending, but that elevated concern is warranted where sexually abusive behaviour is embedded within broader patterns of antisociality, violence, impulsivity, coercion or deviant sexual interest (Lussier et al., [Citation2024](#); McCann & Lussier, [Citation2008](#); Miner, [Citation2002](#); Seto & Lalumière, [Citation2010](#)).

Children who display sexually violent behaviour are nonetheless children, and their behaviour must also be understood through a developmental, ecological and relational lens. Research indicates that adolescents who engage in serious or violent sexual offending are heterogeneous, and that their behaviour may occur alongside overlapping adversities, broader antisocial behaviour, emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, exposure to violence, developmental vulnerabilities or disrupted relational contexts (McCann & Lussier, [Citation2008](#); McPherson et al., [Citation2024](#); Seto & Lalumière, [Citation2010](#)). Sexual violence may arise when children combine severe emotional dysregulation, poor impulse control, learned patterns of aggression, and limited understanding of consent, autonomy or the consequences of their actions. For a small number, violent behaviour may become entangled with sensations of power, control or arousal, particularly where children have been exposed to violence or have had sexual and aggressive scripts modelled to them. This can, but does not necessarily, imply entrenched offending trajectories; in any case, it signals complex needs, often linked to distress, dysregulation or internalised experiences of harm.

Sexually violent behaviour differs from harmful behaviour in the clarity and intensity of its coercive, aggressive and intrusive features. These behaviours are unlikely to be exploratory; instead, they may involve planning, targeting, intimidation or the deliberate use of physical power. The level of distress or injury caused to others is often considerable. Not all children understand the meaning of violence in the way adults do, but the impact on victims is nonetheless profound, and the behaviour must be recognised and responded to as serious sexual violence.

Because of this, sexually violent behaviour requires an immediate safeguarding response and a specialist, multi-disciplinary intervention plan. This should integrate protection for those harmed with intensive therapeutic work for the child responsible, addressing trauma, emotional regulation, relational functioning, neurodevelopmental needs, and environmental contributors. Responses must remain developmentally grounded and focussed on the child's potential for change, the drivers behind the violent behaviour, and the supports required to ensure safety for all.

The sexually violent strand therefore represents the end of the continuum where impact and risk are highest, and where the need for specialist expertise is most acute.

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