



Youth Justice Board
Bwrdd Cyfiawnder Ieuencid

Harmful sexual behaviour, misogyny, and violence carried out by children: Evidence pack

March 2026

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Key definitions

Child/Children

Refers to those under 18 years old as per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹. Throughout the briefing, we adopt non-stigmatising language (e.g., “children displaying HSB”) unless directly quoting policies, data sources or research.

Dating and relationship violence (DRV)

Refers to abusive behaviours in intimate and partner relationships between children, including physical, emotional, sexual and online abuse – also referred to as ‘adolescent domestic abuse’ or ‘teen dating violence’. It differs from domestic abuse, which in UK law has a lower age limit of 16 and can include family relationships and carers.²

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)

The term ‘harmful sexual behaviour’ describes a continuum of behaviours displayed by children under 18, ranging from those considered ‘inappropriate’ at a particular age or developmental stage to ‘problematic’, ‘abusive’ and ‘violent’ behaviours.³

Misogyny

The hostile or discriminatory beliefs and behaviours towards women and girls, both online and offline. It can include rape myths,⁴ sexist stereotypes, harmful masculine norms, hypermasculinity, and hostile beliefs and behaviours directed at women and girls from minoritised groups.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The government defines violence against women and girls as “an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different crimes that are known to disproportionately impact women and girls. These crimes include domestic abuse, rape (and other sexual offences), stalking, harassment, upskirting, revenge porn, so-called ‘honour’-based abuses (such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called ‘honour’ killings) and many more”.⁵ This review focused on children under 18 who perpetrate violence against women and girls, and on the relationship between HSB, misogyny, and violence. As a result, other forms of violence against women and girls such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called honour-based killings did not feature in the literature considered. These issues are highly significant but involve different contexts, perpetrator profiles, and safeguarding responses, and are therefore better addressed through separate dedicated reviews and policy work.

In Wales, the government uses the broader term “violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence” (VAWDASV), which includes violence against women (and girls), domestic abuse, rape and sexual violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, honour based violence, force marriage, stalking, trafficking and other forms of violence⁶. Introduced through the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, this legislation focuses on prevention while providing protection to victims and support to all those affected.

¹ UNICEF. [Children's version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

² Discussions with children have shown they do not generally associate their experiences of abuse with more formal terms such as ‘adolescent domestic abuse’ and instead use language like ‘toxic relationships’. This may lead to preconceptions about what abusive behaviours may look like, which children may not recognise. Riaz & Mutebi. (2025) [Violence against women and girls in schools and among children and young people](#). POST.

³ McNeish & Scott (2023). [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour](#). Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

⁴ These include false beliefs such as “rape is violent, or involves physical force” or “if a woman has flirted on a date, it is not rape”. Whilst there is little information on the prevalence of rape myths among British teenagers, the Crown Prosecution Service research indicates that younger adults (18-24 year-olds) support these misconceptions more than older respondents. CPS & Equally Ours (2024). [Research into the public understanding of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences and consent](#).

⁵ Committee of Public Accounts. (2025). [Tackling Violence against Women and Girls](#)

⁶ Wales Safer Communities Networks. [Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence](#).

1. Summary

- There has been a sharp increase in children displaying harmful sexual behaviour (offences up 47% in 2023–24 and rising again by 6% in 2024–25)⁷, and children report widespread harassment in schools along with high levels of violence, coercion and image-based abuse within peer relationships⁸.
- Misogynistic attitudes are associated with violence against women and girls both online and offline. However, HSB alone is not a reliable predictor of violence against women and girls because HSB exists on a continuum, from inappropriate behaviours that are not abusive to clearly abusive acts that amount to sexual abuse. HSB can be, but is not always, driven by gendered power and misogyny.
- The relationship between HSB, misogyny and violence against women and girls can be shaped by childhood trauma, neglect and additional needs, peer norms, exposure to pornography that promotes aggression and distorted views of consent, and digital algorithms amplifying misogynistic content. Poverty, care experience, and wider disadvantage are recognised as contextual vulnerabilities for youth violence generally, though current evidence does not demonstrate a direct association with HSB or violence against women and girls. However, it is evident that structural inequalities influence the pathways into, and responses from, systems of identification and support⁹.
- Evidence shows school-based programmes can shift knowledge and attitudes, increase children’s willingness to intervene, and may reduce dating and relationship violence. But impacts on violence and abusive behaviour are unclear and there is little UK evidence on targeted interventions with children already displaying harmful behaviours. The most promising interventions are often co-produced with boys and are multi-session and interactive. When children reach youth justice services, proportionate assessment, specialist involvement, and a multi-agency response are key.

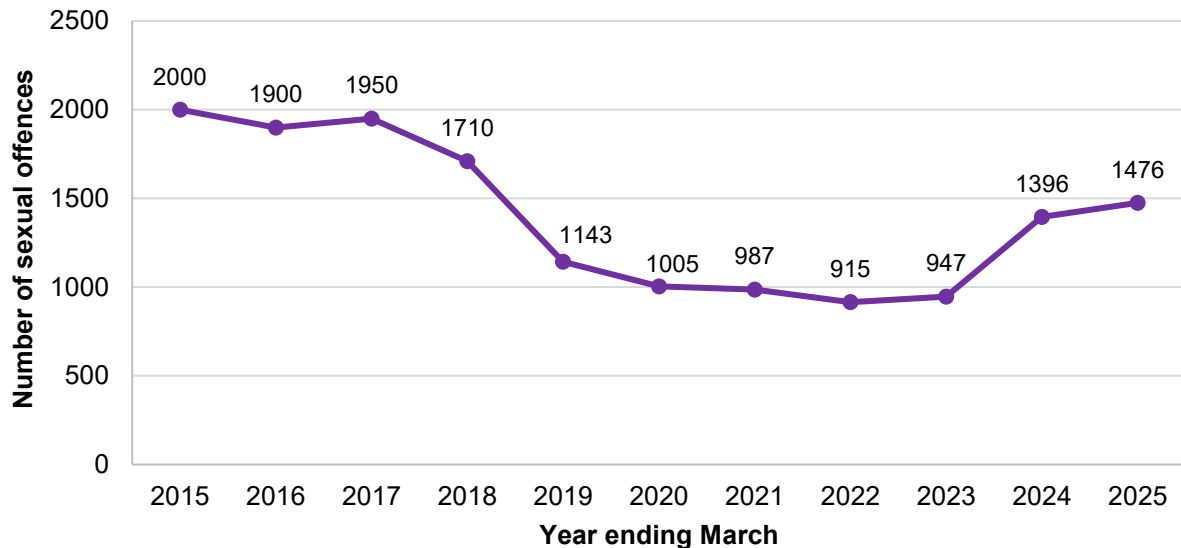
⁷ Youth Justice Board (2026). [Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025](#).

⁸ Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#).

⁹ van den Brink & Lanskey (2025). [Inequality, cumulative disadvantage and youth justice: Towards an analytical framework for understanding and addressing inequalities in youth justice decision-making](#).

2. Trends and key data

Figure 1. Number of proven sexual offences by children, England and Wales, years ending March 2015 to 2025



Sexual offences by children rose by 47% in 2023–24, and a further 6% in the latest year (Figure 1)¹⁰. Approximately 97% of sexual offences were committed by boys.

- The rise in proven offences may in part reflect changes in how cases progress through the system, rather than just reflecting changes in offending rates.
- Longer investigations, court delays, and new charge processes (such as Release Under Investigation) mean more historical cases may be aggregated and completing within the same reporting period. Although time from offence to completion continues to increase suggesting these figures may not be due to clearing the court backlog.
- More victims coming forward, timelier reporting, and improvements in recording practice may be leading to more cases reaching a caution or conviction, although this is difficult to definitively confirm.
- The growth of digital evidence has made offences easier to detect and prove, but it also lengthens investigations due to the volume and complexity of material to review.¹¹

- **Evidence gap:** YJB figures are based on convictions, which is likely underrepresents the true prevalence of sexual offences as many incidents may not be reported or convicted. The Home Office collects self-report data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), though this does not include children under the age of 16, despite them being included in the Home Office's strategy.¹²

¹⁰ Youth Justice Board (2026). [Youth justice statistics: 2024 to 2025](#).

¹¹ His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (2022). [An inspection into how well the police and other agencies use digital forensics in their investigations](#).

¹² Office For National Statistics (2024). [Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2024](#).

In schools, a 2021 Ofsted review showed widespread sexual harassment and normalisation of harmful behaviours. They found that **9 in 10 girls had experienced sexist name-calling or being sent unsolicited sexual images while at school.**¹³ This aligns with recent Department for Education (DfE) data which shows over a third (37%) of pupils aged 11-19 had heard comments that made them concerned about the safety of girls, and over half (54%) said they had witnessed comments they would describe as misogynistic.¹⁴

The Youth Endowment Fund's (YEF) Violence and Vulnerability survey 2024 revealed **nearly half (49%) of 13–17-year-olds in an intimate and partner relationship stated they experienced violent or controlling behaviour (57% of boys and 41% of girls) — 20% have been pressured into sexual acts they didn't want. 19% have been hit, kicked or shoved. 17% have had intimate images of themselves shared online.**¹⁵

The same 2024 YEF survey showed that **27% of all 13-17-year-olds say they've seen images or threats of sexual assault online.** Additionally, 33% have encountered content that encourages violence against women and girls specifically.¹⁶

There are no accurate prevalence figures on the full spectrum of harmful sexual behaviours. However, available data suggests **20-30% of child sexual abuse is carried out by other children.**¹⁷ The vast majority of children who display such behaviour are boys.¹⁸

¹³ Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.](#)

¹⁴ Department for Education (2025). [Parent, pupil and learner voice: March 2025.](#)

¹⁵ Youth Endowment Fund (2025). [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024: How do boys and girls experience violence?](#)

¹⁶ Youth Endowment Fund (2025). [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024: What role does social media play in violence affecting young people?](#)

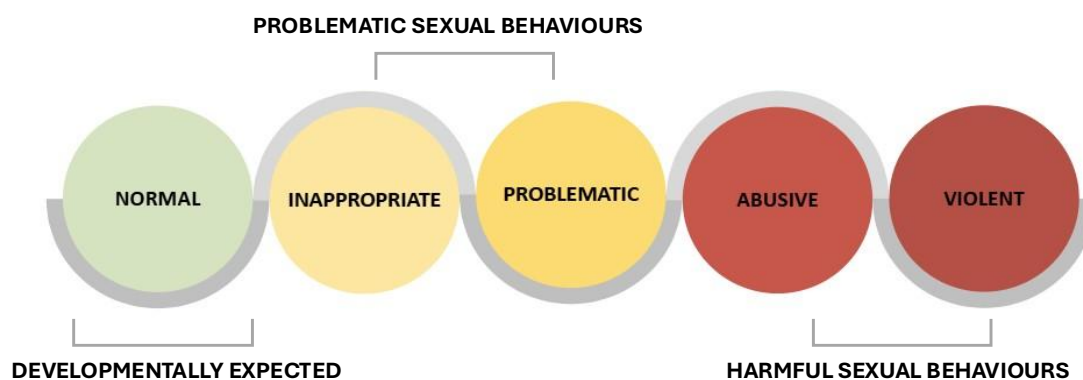
¹⁷ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2016). [Harmful sexual behaviour in children: Evidence for identifying and helping children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour.](#)

¹⁸ McNeish & Scott (2023). [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour.](#) Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

3. How HSB, misogyny and violence against women and girls interact

- Children’s harmful sexual behaviour and misogyny often intersect but are not identical.
- **HSB alone is not a reliable predictor of violence against women and girls.**¹⁹ This is because HSB exists on a continuum (Figure 2), from inappropriate behaviours that are not abusive, through problematic behaviours, to clearly abusive acts that amount to sexual abuse.²⁰ In some children, inappropriate and problematic sexual behaviours may already include elements of misogynistic attitudes or be motivated by gendered power; where such attitudes underpin HSB, it belongs squarely within violence against women and girls prevention.
- While most HSB is displayed by boys, not all HSB targets girls as boys and LGBTQ+ children can also be harmed.²¹

Figure 2: Adapted Hackett’s continuum²² that presents sexualised behaviour as a spectrum from ‘normal’ to ‘inappropriate’, ‘problematic’, ‘abusive’, and ‘violent’. Progression to the later stages is not inevitable with early targeted interventions.



- **Misogyny and misogynistic beliefs (hostility, sexual entitlement, rape myths) are consistently associated with both online and offline violence against women and girls.** It operates as a *driver* (these mechanisms include a desire for revenge and a belief in exaggerated masculine traits known as “hypermasculinity”²³) and a *context* (norms/tolerance) that can escalate harassment into assault and normalise coercive control in intimate and partner relationships between children.²⁴ Early exposure to sexist norms is

¹⁹ Hackett et al. (2024) [Life course outcomes and developmental pathways for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour.](#)

²⁰ Hackett (2010). [Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours.](#) In Barter, C. and Berridge, D. (eds.) *Children Behaving Badly? Peer Violence between Children and Young People.*

²¹ Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.](#)

²² NSPCC (2024). [Understanding sexualised behaviour in children.](#)

²³ Among boys, rigid and exaggerated ideas of “what it means to be a man”—being aggressive, dominant or controlling—are associated with harmful sexual behaviour, particularly where combined with exposure to violent pornography or domestic abuse in the home. See: McKibbin, Green, Humphreys & Tyler (2024). [Pathways to Onset of Harmful Sexual Behavior.](#)

²⁴ Kirkman, Willmott, Boduszek, & Debowska. (2025). [Introduction and validation of the Modern Adolescent Dating Violence Attitude \(MADVA\) scale: A contemporary tool for assessing adolescent attitudes towards dating violence in offline and online environments.](#)

associated with an increased likelihood of violent behaviour in adolescence and adulthood.²⁵

- **Evidence gaps:** There is limited UK evidence:
 - proving a causal pathway from misogynistic attitudes in childhood to sexual violence and abuse, as well as non-sexual violence.
 - on misogynistic attitudes among children under 18 in England and Wales – most evidence is from young adults and studies conducted in the USA.
 - on how algorithmic exposure to misogynistic/sexual content translates into offline abuse.
 - on how factors such as ethnicity, disability or sexuality shape the relationship between misogyny and violence, or how these dynamics present across different types of relationships.
- **These behaviours and attitudes can manifest themselves through dating and relationship violence.** DRV encompasses a range of abusive behaviours within adolescent romantic relationships, including physical, emotional or psychological and sexual, and occur both in person and online. Prevalence data is often patchy with inconsistent measures used. However, both boys and girls report perpetration and victimisation. The YEF 2024 survey revealed that boys in relationships are more likely to say they experience violent or controlling behaviours (57%) compared to girls (41%)²⁶, but harms are gendered, with girls facing higher levels of harm.²⁷

Mechanisms

Individual and developmental

- **International studies suggest the majority of children (5 to 18 year olds) displaying harmful sexual behaviour have themselves been sexually abused or experienced other kinds of trauma or neglect.**²⁸ Older children displaying harmful sexual behaviour are mostly boys, many of whom have also had a history of adverse childhood experiences and family difficulties.²⁹
- **Children who groom or sexually harm other children** often have complex backgrounds that may include exposure to domestic violence, neglect, and physical or sexual abuse. In some cases, their behaviours reflect attempts to process their own victimisation or to exert control within relationships, influenced by trauma and a distorted understanding of what is safe and healthy.^{30,31}
- It is important to remember that **most sexually abused children do not go on to abuse others**, and the majority of children displaying harmful sexual behaviour do not commit sexual offences as adults.³²

²⁵ Clemmow, Rottweiler, Pearson, & Gill. (2025). [Public or private violence? Understanding the overlap between intimate partner abuse and susceptibility to violent extremism.](#)

²⁶ Youth Endowment Fund (2025). [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024. How do boys and girls experience violence?](#)

²⁷ Taquette & Monteiro (2019). [Causes and consequences of adolescent dating violence: a systematic review.](#)

²⁸ Chromy (2007). [Sexually abused children who exhibit sexual behavior problems: Victimization characteristics.](#)

²⁹ Faure-Walker & Hunt (2022). [The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among children and adolescents who display harmful sexual behaviour: A review of the existing research.](#)

³⁰ Leversee (2015). [Etiology and Typologies of Juveniles Who have Committed Sexual Offenses.](#)

³¹ McNeish & Scott (2023). [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.](#)

³² McNeish & Scott (2023). [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse](#)

- A large proportion of children exhibiting inappropriate or harmful sexual behaviours **have a learning disability (approximately 38%) or autism**.^{33, 34, 35} However, this over-representation may be in part due to the high level of adult supervision children with learning disabilities experience.³⁶ This may lead to their sexual behaviour being more frequently observed, and problematised.

Relational and peer

- **Contact with the police is often seen before harmful sexual behaviours emerge.** Some children follow what research refers to as an *antisocial pathway*, where early non-sexual behaviours such as theft, aggression, or property damage reflect broader difficulties with impulse control, empathy, and authority. As these children enter adolescence, similar underlying factors can also shape their developing sexual behaviours, increasing the risk that these become harmful.³⁷
 - **Evidence gap:** However, the evidence on how this pathway operates for under-18s remains limited, and more research is needed to understand how age, gender, and social context influence progression.
- **Schools can provide the support and environment** needed by children with difficult home lives and more vulnerable to engage in sexual abusive behaviours by increasing their sense of belonging.³⁸ Sense of belonging has been identified as an important protective factor in preventing children from engaging in HSB.³⁹

Group-based sexual exploitation and violence

- **Sexual exploitation and violence can occur in group as well as individual contexts.** This includes peer groups, gangs, county lines, and organised exploitation networks. In these environments, harmful sexual behaviours may be normalised and can escalate. Children may be encouraged, pressured, or coerced into grooming or recruiting their peers, or introducing them to older perpetrators to be exploited.^{40,41} Some children may participate in situations of sexual violence to prove their masculine status and enhance their standing, while others engage in such acts to protect themselves.
 - **Evidence gap:** Evidence on the dynamics of group-based exploitation led by children is still developing, with much of the literature focused on adult-led organised exploitation.
- **While most of those who carry out harm are boys, girls can also be involved.**⁴² For example, some boys report being targeted by girls seeking to elevate their status within a gang or to entrap them.
- Along with sexual exploitation, these children are often criminally exploited including being used to hold weapons, commit theft, and transport drugs.⁴³

³³ Hackett et al. (2013). [Individual, Family and Abuse Characteristics of 700 British Child and Adolescent Sexual Abusers](#).

³⁴ Schnitzer, Terry & Joscelyne (2019). [Adolescent sex offenders with autism spectrum conditions: currently used treatment approaches and their impact](#).

³⁵ Maggio et al. (2022). [Sex and Sexuality in Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Scoping Review on a Neglected but Fundamental Issue](#).

³⁶ Allardyce & Yates (2018). [Working with Children and Young People Who Have Displayed Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#).

³⁷ Hackett & Smith (2018). [Young people who engage in child sexual exploitation behaviours: An exploratory study](#). Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

³⁸ Espelage et al. (2023). [Hostile home environment predicting early adolescent sexual harassment perpetration and potential school-related moderators](#).

³⁹ Hackett et al. (2024). [Life course outcomes and developmental pathways for children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour](#).

⁴⁰ Home Office (2025). [National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).

⁴¹ Beckett et al. (2013). ["It's wrong...but you get used to it" - A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England](#). Children's commissioner.

⁴² Vulnerability Knowledge & Practice Programme (2023). [National analysis of police recorded child sexual abuse and exploitation \(CSAE\) crimes \(2023\) report for England and Wales](#).

⁴³ Action for Children (2024). [The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children - Shattered lives, stolen futures](#).

- It is important to recognise that children who carry out group-based sexual violence and exploitation may themselves be victims.
 - **Evidence gap:** The proportion of children that engage willingly compared to those that are coerced is not known. Additionally, the time taken for sexual offences to reach a resolution in court is significantly longer than for other offences⁴⁴, making it difficult to determine the current prevalence of sexual exploitation and violence perpetrated by children.

Digital and online

- **Pornography and sexualised media appear to shape ideas about sex and consent.** The Children’s Commissioner’s 2023 work found first exposure occurred on average at age 13 (with a proportion in primary school).⁴⁵ Research suggests that many children learn about sex primarily through pornography, this can lead young men to think that sex should be ‘aggressive’ and ‘forceful’.⁴⁶
- **Digital environments** are amplifying misogynistic content and normalising harmful attitudes among children, which shapes peer norms and makes harmful behaviour seem appropriate or consequence -free. **Recent research suggests that algorithms amplify harmful content by gamifying and popularising misogynistic and hateful content.**⁴⁷ This can increase the likelihood, persistence and severity of certain forms of HSB (especially harassment, coercion, and image-based abuse).

Structural

- There is currently a lack of robust evidence linking demographic or structural factors, such as poverty, ethnicity, care experience, school exclusion, with HSB, misogyny or violence against women and girls. We know these groups are often disproportionately represented in the youth justice system. What is clearer is that structural inequalities influence the pathways into, and responses from, systems of identification and support. Poverty, ethnicity, and wider disadvantage are recognised as contextual vulnerabilities for youth violence generally, and further research is urgently needed to understand if, and how, these factors influence HSB, misogyny and violence against women and girls.
- The concept of developmentally appropriate sexual behaviour by children is not straightforward: what is ‘expected’ or ‘common’ at different developmental stages is culturally and historically variable, and behaviour considered developmentally appropriate by some people in some contexts may also be problematic or abusive.⁴⁸

Interventions – What works?

Bespoke and co-produced approaches

- Bespoke and co-produced approaches are a key feature of effective Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) and sexual violence interventions for young men and boys. **Asking boys what they know, what they want to know and creating plans and strategies with them is more effective at changing attitudes towards women and girls, sexual health and conduct, and masculinity.** Blaming boys, rather than supporting

⁴⁴ Youth Justice Board (2025). [Serious Incidents Annual Report 2023/24](#)

⁴⁵ Children’s Commissioner (2023). [‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’- Young people and pornography](#)

⁴⁶ Children’s Commissioner (2023). [Evidence on pornography’s influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children.](#)

⁴⁷ Regehr, K., Shaughnessy, C., Zhao, M., & Shaughnessy, N. (2024). [Safer Scrolling: How algorithms popularise and gamify online hate and misogyny for young people.](#)

⁴⁸ McNeish & Scott (2023). [Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour](#)

them to be part of the solution, marginalises them and is counterproductive.^{49 50} It is an important element of a restorative approach to enable boy's involvement in interventions, and aid their understanding of the harmful consequences of HSB.

Universal and school-wide programmes

- Since 2020, Relationships Education (primary), RSHE (secondary) have been statutory, placing clear duties on schools to teach about healthy relationships, consent, harassment and gender equality.
- From September 2026, new [Statutory Guidance](#) on RSHE will come into force in England which features an increased focus on challenging misogyny, as well as additional content on sexual ethics, staying safe in public spaces, and financial exploitation. Schools can begin following the guidance from September 2025 and it must be followed from September 2026.
 - Recent survey data from the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) has highlighted that most children receive some RSHE, but fewer than half of children responding recalled receiving lessons about consent, harassment, or healthy relationships.⁵¹
- School-based, curriculum linked interventions are the most common approach to addressing HSB and misogyny, **aiming to shift knowledge, attitudes, social norms, interpersonal skills, and bystander behaviours.**
- These interventions increase children's knowledge and can shift attitudes around gender norms, consent, and relationships.⁵² YEF and international reviews suggest they may reduce dating and relationship violence perpetration and victimisation, particularly when multi-session and interactive, but the evidence on reducing violence against women and girls more broadly is weaker, inconsistent, and less well established in the UK.
- Bystander programmes embedded in schools can improve attitudes, empathy, and willingness to intervene⁵³, but YEF highlight that evidence of actual behavioural change is mixed, often modest, and rarely sustained without reinforcement.⁵⁴
 - **Evidence gaps:**
 - Few high-quality UK evaluations of school-based programmes exist, with most evidence drawn from North America. Long-term behaviour change, particularly reductions in violence against women and girls, has not been robustly demonstrated.
 - There is little evidence on individual and targeted interventions at the 'inappropriate' or 'problematic' end of the continuum, interventions addressing misogynistic attitudes, or on interventions involving girls or children with learning disabilities.⁵⁵ Most robust evaluations focus on universal school-based programmes. Evidence on tailored interventions (e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for harmful sexual behaviours) is limited, though wider research suggests CBT can reduce violent offending more broadly.

⁴⁹ King-Hill (2024). [Written Evidence Submitted by Dr Sophie King-Hill](#)

⁵⁰ Meiksin et al. (2019). [Protocol for pilot cluster RCT of project respect: a school-based intervention to prevent dating and relationship violence and address health inequalities among young people - Pilot and Feasibility Studies](#)

⁵¹ Youth Endowment Fund (2025). [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024 How do boys and girls experience violence?](#)

⁵² Gaffney, Jolliffe & White (2022). [Dating and Relationship Violence Prevention. Youth Endowment Fund.](#)

⁵³ College of Policing (2022). [Bystander programmes: Evidence briefing](#)

⁵⁴ Gaffney, Jolliffe & White (2023). [Bystander interventions to prevent sexual assault. Youth Endowment Fund.](#)

⁵⁵ McNeish and Scott (2023). [Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour. Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.](#)

4. What youth justice services (YJSs) should do.

- **Knowledge:** Distinguishing between experimental childhood sexual behaviour and more concerning or harmful sexual behaviour can be a complex task. It requires practitioners to understand child development and healthy developmentally appropriate behaviour, as well as issues of informed consent, power imbalances, and exploitation.⁵⁶
- **Multi-agency working:** Children who have carried out sexual offences should be assessed and managed through multi-agency arrangements and a co-ordinated approach with children's services, child protection and local safeguarding arrangements. Children who have committed harmful sexual acts may require specialist support and services. Advice should be sought from health experts that are connected to the youth justice service to determine what this should look like. The [Good Lives Model](#) was specifically developed as a strengths-based approach to addressing harmful sexual behaviour.
- **Assessment:** The needs of children who exhibit sexually harmful behaviour will be identified by the Prevention and Diversion Assessment Tool or AssetPlus (depending on the seriousness of the offence, offence type, age of the child and age of the victim), however further specialist assessments may be required to gauge the child's needs.
- There is general agreement that any assessment should take children's social, emotional and cognitive development into account, along with their and their family's whole circumstances – including any prior experience of abuse.
 - **AIM3** is a structured assessment tool for 12–18-year-olds (with another version for children aged under 12). It helps practitioners gather information, weigh concerns versus strengths, and formulate why the behaviour occurred so plans are proportionate. It does not “spit out” a risk score like “high/medium/low”; it supports structured professional judgement and planning.
- **Management:** Put immediate *management* in place (supervision in certain spaces, device rules, contact boundaries), agreed with the child, carers and school.
- Support removal of self-generated images via **Report Remove**⁵⁷ and teach safer digital habits (privacy, reporting, blocking, evidence capture).
- **Intervention:** Use diversion and *minimal intervention* wherever safe and make any court-ordered conditions specific, time-limited and reviewed as per the YJB's Case Management Guidance.

⁵⁶ HM Inspectorate of Probation (2024). [Children displaying harmful sexual behaviour](#).

⁵⁷ Internet Watch Foundation. [Report Remove – Helping Young People Remove Intimate Images](#); Childline. [Report Remove](#).

5. Practice examples

The YJB hosts a myriad of fora in which youth justice practitioners can share learnings from their everyday work in this area. Many of these are shared in the [YJB Resource Hub](#) and a few examples have been included below:

Girls and boys groups in Cardiff and Neath Port Talbot, Wales

In these areas, following the success of girls' groups aimed at providing support and developing interventions for girls, new initiatives have been launched to create boys' groups focused on improving self-esteem and confidence among young men and boys. These have been established to help address growing concerns around increases in misogynistic views or behaviours displayed by boys and the influence of the "manosphere"—an online subculture that perpetuates harmful ideas about men and women. The aim of the group is to provide a space where boys and young men can explore healthier, more positive definitions of masculinity, while also challenging stereotypes and toxic behaviours that often undermine their emotional well-being.

These groups have been developed at the request of boys. Whilst these are in its initial stages, there are signs of positive results. However, it is too early to share impact.

Engaging men and boys in violence prevention, a Wales Violence Prevention Unit led initiative

This is a positive masculinity programme delivered by Media Academy Cymru, which aims to cater to the diverse needs of children (and young people) through a flexible 3-tier approach:

- **Tier 1:** A one-off bystander session designed to educate large groups on how to effectively respond to and intervene in situations involving toxic behaviours. This session aims to increase awareness and promote proactive behaviour among children.
- **Tier 2:** A tailored set of sessions specifically designed for children on the periphery of displaying toxic behaviours. This tier ensures that the content is accessible and engaging, addressing the unique needs of these individuals while promoting positive masculinity.
- **Tier 3:** The full number of sessions, providing in-depth engagement and education on various aspects of positive masculinity. This tier covers topics such as identifying toxic behaviours, LGBTQ+, peer group, mental health, social media and online gaming lobbies.

The programme aims to:

- Foster a more positive self-identity among children.
- Promote healthy and respectful relationships.
- Increase understanding around misogyny and gender-based violence
- Enhance reflective and critical thinking skills.
- Increase personal safety and the safety of others.
- Improve understanding of appropriate behaviours when witnessing toxic actions

The programme is ongoing, and further details about its impact will be shared with YJB via upcoming management board meetings.

Healthy relationships programmes in Ealing, London

The Youth Justice Service (YJS) in Ealing has been targeting harmful ideas around masculinity and gender for some time. They created a healthy relationship programme aimed at both boys and girls to form a counter-narrative for children showing interest in harmful gender attitudes and norms.

Ealing YJS has successfully worked with specialist partner Tender to deliver this programme, a healthy relationship programme to a group of boys in the YJS aimed at challenging negative stereotypes and behaviours within intimate relationships. They have also invested in additional AIM 3 Working with sexually harmful behaviour training to ensure the team is well equipped to address this behaviour at the earliest point. Two members of staff have been trained in the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) programme, which aims to train children to become young mentors against violence and equips them to be active bystanders against negative behaviour towards women and girls. Ealing also plans to write a procedure for addressing Sexually Harmful Behaviour and develop their girl's strategy to help to protect often vulnerable girls entering the YJS. They also aim for a collaborative early intervention aimed at reducing harm to women and girls.

[AIM.3](#) is the main assessment model that YJS across London are using for HSB.

Teenage Relationship Harm Pilot in Northumberland County Council

Using the learning from the Rapid review following the tragic death of Holly Newton, services in Northumberland recognised the need to address an increasing issue of unhealthy and potentially dangerous behaviour in teenage relationships.

A gap in expertise and provision was identified and engagement with children allowed services to identify a lack of support to equip them to respond to harmful behaviour. Through a multi-agency project board, the following was agreed:

Training for Family Help and Targeted Young People Service (including YJS) staff in [Dating Detox](#) – offered by Respect.

Adopting a similar process to Northumberland's Child to Parent Violence and Abuse Gatekeeper model.

A notification system has been established in Northumberland to help us understand the nature and complexity of this need. This is held in Northumberland's Front Door with close links with the Youth Justice Service. [Several multi-agency pathways](#) are also in place to direct children to the appropriate support.

It is too early in the pilot to understand the impact, although we are already gaining a greater insight into the presenting needs. Next steps included embedding both awareness and toolkit training and launching the pilot with education colleagues.

About the Evidence Pack

Authors

Adela Sobrepera, Senior Researcher, YJB

Lamia Hachoumi, Business Support Officer, YJB

Scope of the Evidence Pack

The evidence briefing aimed to:

- synthesise the evidence on the relationship between misogynistic attitudes, harmful sexual behaviour and offending,
- Identify factors that influence this relationship (e.g. demographics, social media)
- synthesise the evidence on what work in preventing and reducing misogynistic attitudes and harmful sexual behaviours, and promoting pro-social behaviours and positive outcomes for children

Search methodology

This briefing is based on a **narrative review of available evidence** and includes a wide variety of evidence to provide an overall summary. This narrative review was designed to be an informative (rather than all-encompassing) review of recent data and evidence about misogyny, HSB and violence against women and girls. This approach prioritises breadth and contextual understanding over formal critical appraisal, aiming to capture the complexity of factors influencing HSB and misogyny among children and to inform policy and practice responses within the youth justice and safeguarding systems.

- **Exclusion criteria:** population and policy wide interventions (e.g., evaluation of policy), adult only population studies, studies on impact on communities and victimisation, essay or opinion pieces, articles behind a pay wall.
- **Inclusion criteria:** studies in English, published in the last 10 years unless level of relevance showed otherwise, studies conducted based within the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) list. Individual studies and grey literature were included but systematic reviews and meta-analysis were prioritised.
- **Databases searched:** PubMed, Google Scholar, EBSCO
- **Other websites:** Gov.UK, ONS, YEF Toolkit, Resource Hub

Papers identified by topic experts have also been included and reference lists of relevant papers have been screened.

Limitations

Due to time constraints, no critical appraisal has been carried out. This means that whilst we can provide a synthesis of the evidence, we cannot provide an estimate on how strong or robust it is. To mitigate this, systematic reviews that have conducted a critical appraisal process have been prioritised in our search and reporting.

