Safeguarding Checklist: Sexually Inappropriate Behaviour

Adults and children under 16 | Educational information, not a legal determination

Purpose. This checklist describes behaviours that may be sexually inappropriate, harmful, coercive or unsafe. Context matters: age, developmental stage, understanding, power differences, consent, repetition and impact should all be considered. Laws and reporting duties vary by country.

1. Adult behaviour towards a child under 16

- Sexual comments, jokes, innuendo or remarks about a child's body, puberty or appearance.
- Asking a child intrusive questions about their genitals, sexual experiences or private life without a legitimate safeguarding or healthcare reason.
- Showing a child pornography, sexual images, explicit messages or other sexual material.
- Sending, requesting, making, possessing or sharing sexual images of a child. A child's image must never be requested or circulated; suspected material should be reported, not forwarded.
- Unnecessary or unwanted touching, kissing, fondling, or contact with a child's intimate areas.
- Asking or pressuring a child to touch an adult, touch themselves, undress, pose, or take part in sexual activity.
- Exposing genitals, engaging in sexual activity in front of a child, or deliberately making a child witness sexual acts.
- Grooming behaviours: building special or secretive relationships, giving gifts or privileges to gain trust, isolating a child, testing boundaries, or gradually introducing sexual topics or contact.
- Using authority, threats, intimidation, blackmail, guilt, rewards or emotional manipulation to obtain secrecy, images, contact or compliance.
- Ignoring a child's discomfort, refusal, attempts to move away, or request for the behaviour to stop.
- Sexualised contact or communication through social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps or other online channels.

2. Sexualised or harmful behaviour between children under 16

- Unwanted touching, kissing, rubbing against someone, or touching intimate areas.
- Pressuring another child to take part in sexualised games, imitation of sexual acts, undressing or exposing body parts.
- Making sexual comments, gestures, jokes, noises or repeated remarks after being asked to stop.
- Asking for, creating, sending, showing or sharing nude or sexual images, or pressuring someone else to do so.
- Looking under clothing, secretly photographing intimate areas, or invading another child's privacy in toilets, changing rooms or bedrooms.
- Using threats, bullying, force, bribery, peer pressure, blackmail or social exclusion to obtain sexualised behaviour.
- Targeting a younger, more vulnerable or less developmentally mature child, or exploiting a difference in age, size, authority or understanding.
- Repeatedly pursuing sexualised behaviour despite another child's discomfort, refusal or distress.
- Sharing sexual rumours, humiliating a child about their body, or distributing intimate information or images.

3. Behaviour that may be developmentally expected

Some curiosity about bodies, privacy, puberty and relationships can be part of development. A behaviour is not automatically harmful because it involves curiosity. It becomes more concerning when it is coercive, intrusive,

persistent, distressing, explicit beyond the child's developmental understanding, involves force or a power imbalance, or continues after boundaries are set. Avoid labelling a child as an abuser based on a single behaviour; assess the behaviour and protect everyone involved.

4. Warning signs that need prompt attention

- A child says they feel frightened, pressured, unsafe, ashamed or unable to say no.
- There is force, threats, secrecy, manipulation, injury or a marked power imbalance.
- The behaviour is repeated, escalating, highly intrusive or causes significant distress.
- An adult is seeking private access, secrecy, sexual images or unnecessary intimate contact.
- A child discloses sexual contact, grooming, exploitation or online coercion.

5. What to do if a concern arises

- Put the child's immediate safety first. Separate children if needed without blame or confrontation.
- Listen calmly. Reassure the child that they did the right thing by telling you and that it is not their fault.
- Use open prompts such as "Tell me what happened." Do not ask leading questions or repeatedly interview the child.
- Record the child's words as accurately as possible, along with dates, times, observed behaviour and actions taken. Keep records secure.
- Do not promise secrecy. Explain that you may need to share information with people whose job is to help keep them safe.
- Do not confront a suspected person if doing so could increase risk or interfere with safeguarding enquiries.
- Contact the relevant child-protection service, safeguarding lead, police or healthcare professional. If there is immediate danger, contact emergency services.
- Do not download, copy, forward or circulate suspected child sexual abuse images. Report them to the appropriate authorities or platform.

Important: This is a general safeguarding resource, not a checklist for diagnosing abuse or deciding whether a crime has occurred. The legal age of consent, definitions of offences and mandatory reporting rules differ between jurisdictions. For a specific incident, seek advice from the local child-protection authority or a qualified safeguarding professional.

If a child is in immediate danger, contact local emergency services. In Spain, call 112 for emergencies.

Prepared as an educational reference. Review against local safeguarding policy and current law before publication or professional use.