

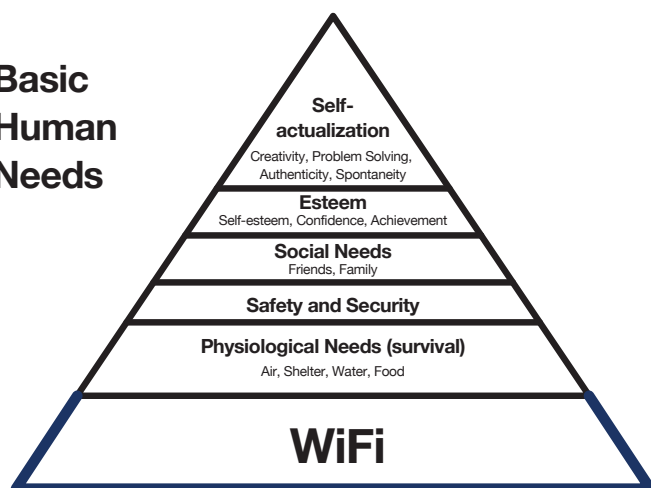
Practice Notes

Technology-Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour (TA-HSB)



Assessment
Intervention
Moving On

Basic Human Needs



Technology and digital communication are now such an integral part of children and young people's lives that it is no longer possible or helpful to separate their experiences into an 'online world' and an 'offline world', as the two co-exist and overlap. Technology can provide a range of benefits such as entertainment and connection, however children and young people can also be harmed and cause harm using technology.

It is important to firstly recognise from the outset that children and young people are vulnerable to technology-based harm (CSA Centre, 2023; Project DeShame 2017; UNICEF, 2017). Rather than there being specific sites or apps that are 'risky' for children, the evidence highlights that most problematic and harmful sexual interactions take place via commonly used platforms such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, X, and Instagram (Goharian et al., 2022).

Technology is also an integral part of young people's relationships (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017) and so, as with other types of social and sexual behaviour, technology-based sexual

behaviour should be viewed on a continuum in which it can be:

Developmentally

Problematic

Harmful

Youth produced sexual imagery ('sexting') is an example of a behaviour that is now typical in the interactions and relationships of young people. The growing evidence base, including the views of young people, shows sexting to be complicated and not necessarily always victimising (WHO, 2022), although non-consensual sharing of images has the potential to be extremely harmful.

There is an emerging research base in terms of technology-based harmful sexual behaviour, however this is an area in which further research is required to support in prevention, and clinical practice with those that have displayed TA-HSB (CSA Centre, 2023).

The impact of pornography on children and young people is a growing area of concern. Pornography includes unhelpful and potentially harmful messages, with evidence of violent and misogynistic content (Carrotte et al., Fritz et al., 2020). There is concern that young people are less able to counter-balance these messages and although not causal, associations have been found between exposure to pornography and sexual attitudes and behaviours (Hollis & Belton, 2017; Mori et al., 2023). The extent of impact appears to be linked to factors such as the young person's support network, social learning, and other demographic factors (Massey, 2021).

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Children have themselves expressed that pornography can impact on their expectations and sexual behaviours (Children's Commissioner, 2023).

Findings suggest that children and young people that have displayed harmful sexual behaviours (specifically those that have accessed child sexual abuse material) tend to have more stability in their developmental histories, less difficulties in education and be less likely to present with other harmful or anti-social behaviours than young people that have displayed other forms of harmful sexual behaviour (Belton & Hollis, 2016; Holton & Bellis, 2017).

A further study found maltreatment concerns were present for just less than half (44%) of a sample of young people that had displayed technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour, and 36% were reported to have a diagnosed or suspected mental health condition, learning disability or autistic spectrum disorder (Vaswani et al., 2022). Some (small-scale) studies indicate that social isolation, social difficulties, and questioning sexual identity may be factors of relevance in technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours. (Lewis, 2018).

First and foremost, there is a need for prevention strategies in relation to technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour and this requires a systemic approach involving the systems in which children exist including families, schools, and communities ('online' and 'offline'). Children and young people are often more knowledgeable and skilled with technology than the adults around them and so prevention efforts must involve educating and increasing the confidence of parents, carers, and professionals working with children and young people.

In addition to prevention, it is key that parents, carers, and professionals have increased knowledge in skill in recognising and responding to problematic and harmful sexual behaviours that have taken place via technology. It has been

found that society (including safeguarding professionals) have found it more difficult to recognise technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour and when it has been recognised this behaviour has been erroneously assumed to be less harmful than direct contact harmful sexual behaviour Hamilton-Giachristis et al., 2021; Stonard, 2020).

The key role which technology plays in the life of children and young people evidences the need for consideration of their digital safety to be an integral part of all assessments and interventions with children and families, rather than this only being considered once harm has taken place. AIM offer a one-day training course which can be attended by any professional which support in the recognition and response to technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours.

AIM & NSPCC produced Practice Guidance to support in the assessment of children and young people that have displayed TA-HSB (Allotey & Swann, 2019), with an accompanying two-day training. There is currently work taking place to integrate this guidance with the AIM 3 assessment model.

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