

Event Report

Staying Safe: Exploring the needs of young people with additional support needs who experience or present with Harmful Sexual Behaviour and their families

This event was held on Monday 4th February at Norton Park Conference Centre in Edinburgh. It was the first of two interconnected events being organised in partnership between SOLD, the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, and the Scottish Transitions Forum. Both events focus on the subject of Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) and young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN), and exploring inclusive strategies for prevention and early intervention.

The purpose of this event was to engage with professionals, families and young people with lived experience of these issues, and to gain insight into how it feels to be struggling with these behaviours, what supports are needed, what motivates HSB in young people with ASN, and examples of positive interventions or support.

Attendees were asked to consider three principle questions:

- **What has worked well in your experience?**
- **What do you think are the barriers or challenges to achieving successful outcomes?**
- **What do you think could help or improve things in the future?**

There is a lot of good work being done to intervene effectively with young people who exhibit signs of HSB. However, this work is largely focused on the general population. It is important therefore to ensure that young people with young people with learning disabilities; autism; speech, language and communication needs; and/or other additional support needs are not unfairly disadvantaged or excluded, and that they have equal opportunity to benefit from early intervention.

The event was attended by 80 delegates from a range of backgrounds including professionals from education, social work, academia, voluntary sector organisations, and the Scottish Government, and parents. Insight from young people with additional support needs was included anonymously. These included pre-recorded case studies and findings from academic research.

Keynote presentations were given by:

- Carole Murphy, Practice Development Advisor, Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice
- Paula Jacobs, PhD Student, University of Edinburgh

- Joanne Barrie, Community Sexual Health Educator, NHS Forth Valley
- Shona Robertson and Stewart Evers, Social Workers, The HALT Service.

We were keen to capture as much information as possible from attendees. To achieve this, two methods were used. Firstly, all attendees were issued with a feedback form on which they were asked to record any thoughts or ideas they had throughout the day. Secondly, attendees were invited to participate in facilitated round table discussions during the afternoon session. A note of discussions was taken from each table. Direct quotes from feedback forms and table discussions have been used in this report.

This information will inform the content of our follow-up event: **'Prevention, Intervention & Inclusion: Harmful Sexual Behaviour and young people with additional support needs'**, which will take place on 3rd April in Glasgow.

We asked: What has worked well in your experience?

A number of themes were identified:

Working in partnership and taking a joined up approach was reported as successful. This allows for decisions to be made collaboratively, and for making use of the expertise of a range of professionals. Many attendees emphasised the importance of involving parents and young people themselves, especially in planning and decision-making.

- ***"Collaborative decision making"***
- ***"Close working with colleagues from Forensic Community LD team"***
- ***"Joined up multidisciplinary approaches – same messages, same actions, same reactions"***
- ***"Partnership working – parents, SLT's, SW's"***

Attendees stated that clear **leadership** was important, and that in the past, this had been most effective when the Scottish Government had provided the policy lead.

- ***"Clear leadership"***
- ***"Clear guidance"***
- ***"Legal back up"***

Several attendees said that it was important for young people to have a **safe space** in which they could talk and be listened to. One example offered was a confidential phone line which allowed young people firstly disclose anything they wanted, and to explore their feelings. Attendees said it was important that such safe spaces allowed young people to stay in control of what information they want to disclose, and that they are able to do that when they themselves feel ready to. And that young people must not feel judged in any way. Such approaches have allowed young people to open up and share.

- ***"Confidential line to firstly disclose explore feelings. Prepare for seeking child protection support. To stay in control of information they want to disclose"***.
- ***"understanding and availability of private and safe space"***
- ***"Access to confidential advice, being listened to without judgement and chance to make sense of experiences"***

Attendees also talked about the importance of involving young people, and that successful outcomes had been achieved when strategies had been **co-produced** with the young person.

Throughout the day a number of attendees mentioned the importance of taking a **strengths-based approach**. One attendee referenced **John O'Brien's Five Accomplishments** as an example of such an approach. For this to be successful, it had been necessary to take a positive and enabling attitude to risk management, allowing young people to have the room to express themselves in age-appropriate ways, and to have opportunity to learn from experience.

- ***“Understanding individual perspective and strengths of individual”***

Many attendees offered good examples of good practice in **Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood (RSHP)** education. The point was reiterated that good outcomes had been achieved when RSHP had begun as early as possible in young people's lives. It was also stated that young people have often engaged most effectively with RSHP when it has been delivered with somebody they already know and trust. For this reason, it is critical that all people involved in a young person's life are **supported to feel comfortable** discussing sexual behaviour.

- ***“Sexual identity – professionals not feeling comfortable (LGBT)”***

This was reinforced more generally, with attendees emphasising the importance of relationships between all those involved, and that building a strong sense of **trust** was essential. Other attendees stated the importance of getting to know the whole family.

- ***“Getting to know family/trust”***
- ***“Relationships – building with parents, students other organisation. Getting past preconceived ideas or awareness and gaining trust”***

Two other points were raised in discussions. These were the importance of **lifelong learning** for people with ASN, and that many people coped best when they had ongoing support throughout their lives. The other point concerned the importance of having a sound **understanding of the underlying reasons behind young people's behaviour**, and that this was essential for successfully supporting them to address those behaviours.

- ***“Lifelong learning and ongoing revisiting”***

In her presentation, Joanne Barrie explained that when young people engage in HSB, their behaviour is trying to meet a need. It is important to observe patterns of behaviour in order to identify the underlying motivations.

We asked: What do you think are the barriers or challenges to achieving successful outcomes?

It was acknowledged by attendees that there is **not sufficient support for families**, and parents often feel like they have to fight for every bit of support for their young people. Parents who have their own ASNs may find it difficult to recognise signs of HSB or be able to

provide the necessary support to their young people. A lack of awareness of the importance of RSHP or personal views can lead to parents sometimes removing their young people from RSHP. Further to this many attendees felt that our society often fails to view young people with additional support needs as sexual beings.

- ***“Parents can feel battling and fighting”***
- ***“Denying sexuality/sexual orientation of people with ASNs”***

Many attendees highlighted a **lack of training and support for professionals and teachers** to confidently and competently deliver RSHP education, or to address issues relating to HSB.

- ***“Not enough experts in sex education (not enough teachers with training)”***
- ***“Reluctance to have ‘difficult conversations’”***

One key issue that was identified by a significant number of attendees as the **lack of appropriate, quality resources** that can be easily adapted for young people with ASN. Where resources did exist they were often seen as dated and of poor quality. Attendees stated that competing demands and time constraints impact on their ability to research or develop appropriate resources.

- ***“Resources most out of date and out dated messages – quality of resources that are still out there often poor”***
- ***“Where good ones have been developed these are not shared”***

Attendees cited a **lack of national policy** in relation to RSHP as a barrier to improving consistency of quality and access of RSHP for young people with with ASN.

- ***“national policies need to make sex education a right, and legislation needs to give people the back-up”***
- ***“Lack of action at Government level”***

A number of attendees highlighted several human rights issues such as denying the sexuality of young people with ASN, making assumptions about young people’s capacity without appropriate assessment, and denying access to RSHP education and life long learning.

- ***“Assume people ASN do not have capacity”***

Attendees identified **fears** relating to RSHP and HSB. These included the fear of doing or saying the wrong thing, and taboo around the subject of sex. They felt that these fears can often lead to or increase **risk averse attitudes**, which can ultimately lead to restrictions of human rights.

- ***“Fear of topic - teachers, carers, professionals”***
- ***“Fear of getting it wrong”***
- ***“Fear – misunderstanding of the law”***

Another key challenge identified was **too great an emphasis on crisis intervention, and not enough focus on proactive, preventative early intervention.**

- *“We have targets for Maths, Reading etc but only seem to have goals around sexuality during crisis. Need more focus of sexual education in general”*

In her presentation Paula Jacobs highlighted that a greater level of supervision restricts opportunities for young people with additional support needs to develop relationships with peers.

This was also echoed in comments by attendees. It was emphasised that there was often a real **lack of opportunities for young people with additional support needs to socialise with peers and develop skills**. Further to this it was commented that if an incident of inappropriate behaviour has occurred then young people are often further excluded from social settings or groups due to a perceived risk to others. Several attendees mentioned that over-protection of young people can often lead to isolation.

- *“Limitations of what services/ groups will allow young people who have previously displayed HSB to be involved ”*
- *“How to manage risk and not isolate young person further*

During table discussions the **influence of the media** was commented on. Children and young people are exposed to often overly sexualised images from a very young age through mainstream media. As they get older this often includes access to online material. It was highlighted that due to current lack of early RSHP education children and young people often lack positive sex education to counterbalance to these influences until their mid teens.

- *“Exposure to overly sexualised images – media”*

Concerns around information sharing and confidentiality were identified as a key challenge to a multidisciplinary approach to supporting young people. This poses a barrier to engaging professionals from other disciplines such as speech and language therapy.

- *“Information sharing – tensions – managing risk v confidentiality”*

We asked people: What do you think could help or improve things in the future?

Attendees stated that improvements could best be driven by the Scottish Government providing **leadership** with legislation.

It was generally felt that **RSHP** needs to be recognised as an essential life skill, and a **mandatory part of the school curriculum**, and that this needs to be the case for every young person regardless of ASN. As part of this, attendees said that RSHP should begin as early as possible in young people’s education.

- *“Sexual health not built into curriculum”*
- *“For sexual education to be started for all people at a young age. We look after mental health and physical health, why not sexual health?”*
- *“Inclusion for LD young people where they are safe”*

The point was also made that there needs to be a **standard national set of resources for young people with ASN** in order to ensure that all young people have equal access to RSHP, and that there is consistency across the country. Some attendees offered that resources needed to be flexible enough to be tailored to meet the individual learning needs and life stage development of each young person.

- *“RSHP Resources for LD”*
- *“Education. Interest in providing education tailored to all levels of need of young people”.*

Attendees recognised that this would require considerable investment. Hence the need for Government to take the lead.

In her presentation, Paula Jacobs explained that many young people with ASN find it difficult to transfer learning from the classroom and apply it in practice. She stated that people often learn best by experience, and so need the opportunity to do that.

In their presentation, Shona Robertson and Stewart Evers emphasised the importance of understanding each young person’s communication style.

A number of attendees also stated that there was a need to recognise the **importance of lifelong learning**, beyond school and into adulthood.

One of the themes that came out strongly from discussions was the need for **parents to be better supported**. It was felt that parents ought to be properly involved at every stage, and in every decision. It was also stated that there was a need for tools and support to help parents to recognise early signs and address issues of HSB with young people with ASN. There was also the suggestion that parents could benefit from advocacy support and representation.

- *“Support for families”*

Issues around risk management were extensively discussed, and many attendees felt there was a need for a **positive approach to risk** and for a **strengths-based approach** to be routinely adopted with young people with ASN. This would require a cultural shift for young people with ASN to more generally seen as sexual beings. It would be essential for all of us to **challenge prejudices and to remove stigma**.

- *“The human right to a healthy relationship”*
- *“A culture of thinking, allowing ourselves to understand our children are sexual beings and this needs to be supported and informed”.*
- *“Strengths based model – from beginning – same possibilities as everyone”.*

Attendees stated that when people are engaging with young people with ASN about HSB, that the responses are proportionate, and not over-reactive. People added that intervention should be made as early as possible, and that the young person should be fully involved in any planning, etc.

The point was made by Carole Murphy in her presentation, that as our understanding of **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** increases, it ought to be possible to **target resources at young people most at risk**.

However, it is important that this is done in a way which does not inadvertently cause or add to stigma or labelling of those young people. A **person-centred approach** should allow the young person to retain some sense of control.

Joanne Barrie in her presentation, made the point that when young people with ASN exhibit HSB, their behaviour is trying to meet a need. It is essential to observe that behaviour closely in order to understand the motivation.

- ***“Supporting help seeking behaviours, protective behaviours”***

Many attendees reiterated the importance and effectiveness of young people having access to a safe space in which they can talk and be listened to. This has to be a space in which they do not feel judged, and are able to disclose when they feel ready to.

- ***“Listening space for child/young person. Hand of 5 – space to chat – but more than one person to prevent abuse”***

In discussions, many attendees said they thought there needed to be an increase in the confidence of all professionals, and families, to be able to recognise the early signs of HSB, and to raise and address these issues with young people with ASN. It is important to increase the capacity of all workers because in research, young people have stated that they prefer to be taught by someone they already know and trust. Increased workforce capacity would help to facilitate this, and would mean we were better equipped for early intervention and prevention.

In their presentation, Shona Robertson and Stewart Evers said workers need to feel comfortable with both learning disabilities and sex.

Appropriate support and training for all those involved and effected, will be necessary to achieve this.

- ***“Professional Training – Raised Understanding across every professional”***
- ***“Challenging the taboo of speaking about sex”***

In her presentation, Joanne Barrie said that support needs to come from those the young person knows best.

Attendees stated that there is clearly a need for a multi-disciplinary approach, and for effective information sharing between agencies, professionals and families. The point was made that this issue is bigger than just schools, and that effective intervention needs to holistically involve all people involved in a young person’s life. A number of attendees felt there were probably lessons that could be learned from a whole system approach.

In her presentation Carole Murphy emphasised the need for an individualised, holistic, systemic, collaborative intervention.

Next Steps

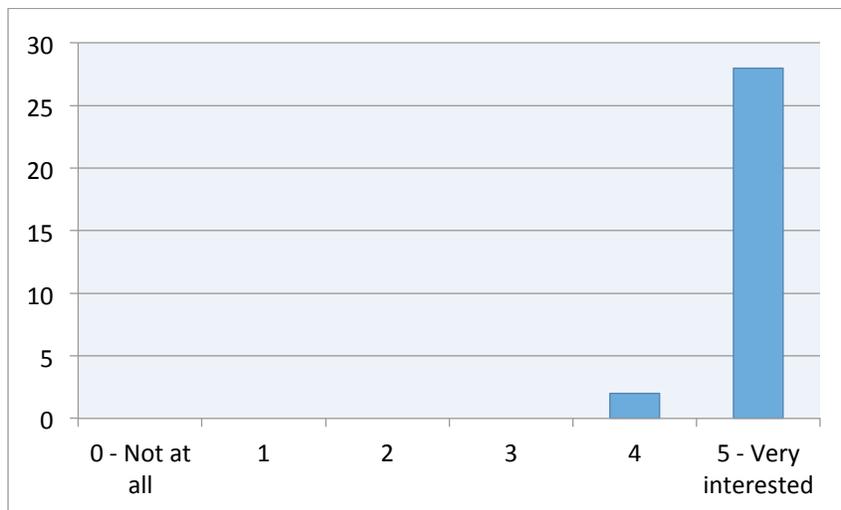
As part of the follow-up event **'Prevention, Intervention & Inclusion: Harmful Sexual Behaviour and young people with additional support needs'** there will be a series of workshops (eg. Exploring the impact of online pornography; working with young people and families; importance of Speech and Language intervention etc).

We asked: Is there any particular subject you think ought to be explored?

- **"Need to know more about impacts of online pornography and social media"**
- **"Healthy relationships and positive risk taking, and reducing stigma"**
- **"More shared learning events"**
- **"Need to have better resources for LGBTQ and YP"**
- **"More about benefits of SLT"**

We will endeavour to ensure these topics are reflected in presentations and workshops at the follow-up event on 3rd April. Many thanks for your suggestions.

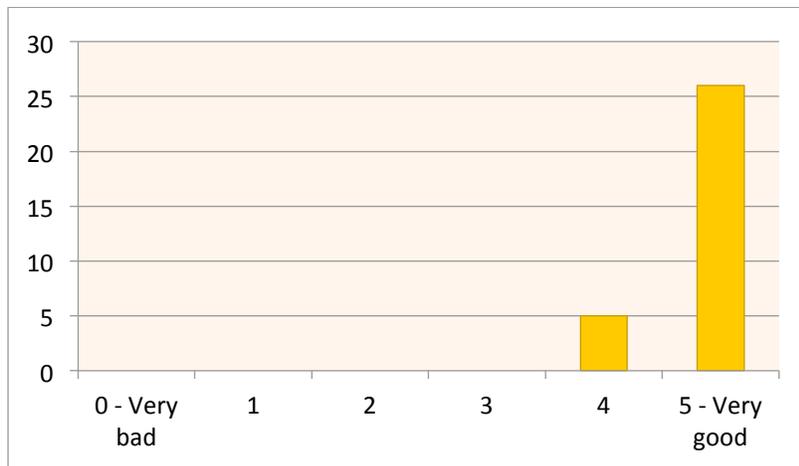
We asked: How interested are you in taking part in further events on this subject?



- **"Fantastic to have CP/disability staff/families and individuals together – all to learn from each other"**
- **"Realising others are solving some problems as it helps drive you and gaining tips makes things seem more achievable"**
- **"Good to have round table discussion might have been better to split the morning with some discussion"**

- **“Great conference and opportunity to learn from others and network”**
- **“Very relevant to the people we support and is a great learning and is a great learning and networking event”**
- **“Good way to network and see that as workers we are not working in isolation. Enjoyed all presentations, learnt a lot, thank you.”**

We asked: How would you rate this event overall?



We asked: Please tell us anything that was particularly helpful or unhelpful about the event.

- **“All the Presentations were great and informative”**
- **“I thought the speakers were excellent and I also enjoyed the roundtable discussions at the end”**
- **“Sometimes questions felt a bit open so sometimes we interpreted differently and almost answered different questions. This may be a positive too”**
- **“Having parents attending and participating in round table discussions”**
- **“All the speakers brought really useful and thought provoking material. A really worthwhile day. Thank you.”**
- **“Liked the range of speakers and their knowledge of resources they highlighted.”**