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Into the conceptual "sin bin": the contested positioning of children who display harmful sexual behaviours

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ABSTRACT

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in childhood is a complex and contested field of practice. While traditionally viewed through criminological and risk-oriented lenses, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that such framings inadequately capture the developmental, relational and social contexts in which children's sexual behaviours emerge. This paper critiques the enduring dominance of forensic paradigms in the conceptualisation and management of HSB, arguing that these approaches risk casting children into a conceptual "*sin bin*" that obscures their status and rights as children. Drawing on insights from childhood studies, developmental psychology and critical social theory, the paper repositions HSB as a phenomenon of disrupted childhood. It advocates for a reframing of policy and practice that foregrounds children's agency, social ecologies and developmental trajectories, while resisting reductive narratives of risk and recidivism. The paper concludes by proposing a rights-based, developmentally informed framework for understanding and responding to HSB that recognises both the complexity and humanity of the children involved.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

This paper applies insights from childhood studies to reframe harmful sexual behaviour as a problem of disrupted development rather than criminal deviance. It calls for proportionate, trauma-informed interventions that strengthen developmental pathways, rebuild relationships and foster children's long-term wellbeing, rather than simply interrupting behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) in childhood remains one of the most emotive and contested concerns within contemporary safeguarding and child-welfare practice. Whereas the issue of "juvenile sex offending" was previously regarded as affecting a relatively small number of deviant young people, the conceptualisation of HSB has since broadened professional attention to a wider spectrum of behaviours, encompassing those that are developmentally inappropriate and problematic as well as those that are abusive and

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may constitute a sexual offence (Hackett, 2010). What was once regarded as a peripheral concern within the broader field of adult sexual offending has now become a mainstream child-wellbeing and safeguarding priority, as exemplified by the publication of the UK's first public-health guidance on childhood HSB (NICE, 2016).

Conceptualising children as "sexual abusers" or "juvenile sex offenders" has, however, often obscured the child behind the behaviour with the stigmatised identity of *abuser* driving intervention responses (Hackett et al., 2019) and reinforcing interpretations of children's sexual behaviours as extensions or precursors of adult sexual offending. Yet, as with notions of childhood itself, crime is a socially constructed phenomenon imbued with political and cultural meaning over time. As Christie (1998, p. 156) observed, "crime does not exist; crime is created. First there are acts, then follows a long process of giving meaning to those acts". In this way, criminologically oriented constructs of juvenile sex offending have shaped the terrain upon which children and young people are understood – from the ontological foundations of theory through to policy and practice responses. In turn, these discourses and practices have "othered" such children, positioning them outside the boundaries of normative childhood and obscuring their rights to be seen as children in social and developmental terms.

Recognising the limitations of such framings, this paper reorients the problem of HSB within the paradigm of childhood studies. It seeks to explore more developmentally and socially sensitive understandings, responses and preventive approaches to harm by and between children. The paper traces the socio-historical roots of how children who display HSB have been conceptually displaced from the domain of childhood, shaped by adult-centric scientific and forensic paradigms that stretch frameworks developed for adult offenders to fit children. It reflects on both the substantial development of knowledge that now differentiates HSB in childhood from adult sexual offending and the enduring legacies of criminological thinking that continue to haunt the field – leaving children who display HSB conceptually in the *sin bin*: neither fully child nor fully adult.

Drawing on key theoretical touchstones from childhood studies and allied fields, the paper calls for a reframing of HSB as a phenomenon of disrupted childhood, with corresponding implications for research, policy and practice. The following sections move from a critique of criminological and risk-focused framings to an exploration of how concepts of childhood temporality, spatiality and agency open new possibilities for understanding and prevention.

2. Placing the child in the conceptual *sin bin*

Awareness of sexual abuse by children as a clinically distinct phenomenon emerged in the late 1980s in the wake of growing recognition of child sexual abuse more broadly. In this context, children's harmful sexual behaviours became reconstituted at social, institutional and policy levels as adult-defined acts and crimes through which adult anxieties about risk and deviance are projected (Haydon & Scraton, 2000). Brownlie (2001, p. 524) notes how notions of sex and risk became played out on the minds and bodies of children, producing the subjectivity of the young sexual abuser as "being risky" rather than "being child". Such representations fragmented the conceptual category of the child itself. As Piper (2000, p. 28) notes, it is difficult to "sustain an image of a child who is both sexualised and deserving of protection". In this collision between sexuality and innocence, the child who displays HSB became suspended in a liminal space between child-victim and child-perpetrator – theoretically everywhere and nowhere.

These uncertainties about how to position children's sexuality and, by extension, their sexual behaviours were compounded as the emerging HSB field drew heavily on the knowledge base surrounding adult sexual offending, rooted in positivist paradigms that were uncritically applied to children. Worling (2013, p. 80) identifies five misconceptions that dominated early approaches to evaluation and treatment as the "five Ds..... deviant, delinquent, disordered, deficient and deceitful". Such perspectives pathologised children, focusing on their actions rather than on age, maturity, cognitive or sexual development and social or familial context (Myers, 2002). This alignment of children with adult sex offenders operated on two levels: first, by imposing adult conceptualisations of sexual deviance; and second, by fixing children with a stigmatising identity as "abusers".

These conceptualisations were underscored by a pervasive belief that problematic sexual behaviours in childhood foreshadowed adult sexual offending. Professional interventions became preoccupied with interrupting an assumed trajectory toward future adult offending, rather than supporting children's recovery and development. Early writing illustrates this anxiety, such as Cantwell's (1988) reference to "very young perpetrators" implied a trajectory from childhood misbehaviour to adult predation, while Becker and Abel's (1985) estimate that an "adolescent sex offender" might commit hundreds of sexual offences across a lifetime amplified fears of inevitable recidivism. Such assumptions contradicted youth-justice principles emerging in the 1990s, which recognised that most young people mature out of offending behaviour. Nevertheless, the "young sexual abuser" became entrenched as a distinct category of offender (Masson & Hackett, 2003).

The metaphor of the *sin bin* offers a useful lens through which to understand this positioning. In school settings, a *sin bin* was traditionally a space of temporary exclusion – a holding area for those deemed to have breached the rules, separated from the mainstream until they demonstrated reform or remorse. Similarly, children who display HSB have been conceptually confined to a figurative *sin bin*: excluded from the moral and social spaces of normative childhood yet not fully accommodated within adult systems of justice. Their behaviour is interpreted through moralising and punitive logics that isolate and pathologise, leaving them suspended – neither fully child nor fully adult, neither entirely victim nor offender. This conceptual marginalisation reflects wider societal unease with the "double taboo" of sexual abuse involving children: both the taboo of adult abuse of children and the further taboo of children sexually harming other children (Barnardo's, 2016).

3. Reframing children who display harmful sexual behaviour

These early constructions left a deep imprint on professional thinking and systems of response. Over time, however, the dissonance between viewing children as miniature versions of adult offenders and recognising their developmental distinctiveness has become increasingly difficult to sustain. Practitioners and researchers alike began to question whether the very terminology and frameworks inherited from the adult sex-offender field were themselves perpetuating misunderstanding and stigma (see Hackett et al., 2006 for early evidence of this shift in practitioner discourse and language). Although, labels such as "perpetrator", "adolescent sexual offender" or "abuser" have been hard to shake off and exemplify the enduring influence of criminological and forensic

discourses that foreground deviance. These reflections marked the beginning of a gradual, international shift from seeing children as offenders to understanding HSB as a developmental, social and welfare issue. Yet, as we argue throughout this paper, this remains an ongoing and incomplete process.

Language is, of course, never neutral. The terminology used to describe children whose sexual behaviour comes to the attention of professional systems profoundly shapes public discourses, professional responses and children's self-understandings. As such, professionals should recognise that the words they use are not mere descriptors but interventions in themselves. Despite this, continuing ambiguity in the field means there is still no universally agreed terminology and professional vocabularies continue to vary across time, place and discipline.

Nevertheless, practitioners and researchers internationally have begun to shift their lexicon and practice. HSB is now defined as "sexual behaviours by children and young people, under the age of 18, that are developmentally inappropriate, harmful towards self and others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult" (Hackett et al., 2019). This definition focuses on behaviour rather than identity, marking a significant departure from earlier offender-based language. It also acknowledges that the impacts of such behaviour extend beyond sexual harm to encompass broader emotional, relational and developmental consequences – both for those displaying the behaviour and for those affected by it. The continuum model (Hackett, 2010) situates sexual behaviours in childhood along a spectrum from developmentally expected through to harmful, providing a practice framework that supports proportionate, contextualised and developmentally informed responses.

These definitional and conceptual developments have provided a more constructive vocabulary but they must be grounded in an appreciation of what empirical research now shows about this population. HSB is not a single phenomenon but a cluster of behaviours arising from multiple and interacting influences. Recognising this diversity is critical if responses are to be proportionate, effective and just.

Children and young people who display HSB constitute an extremely heterogeneous group. Many have experienced multiple adversities and find themselves navigating fragmented systems of child welfare and youth-justice. Balfe et al. (2019, p. 189) describe the "shockingly wide catalogue of trauma and harm" saturating the disrupted sociological worlds of these young people. Studies consistently record high levels of exposure to violence, neglect, deprivation and abuse. In a large-scale study of 700 young people referred for HSB, Hackett et al. (2013) reported that 66% had experienced abuse of some form. Family circumstances often feature deprivation, domestic abuse, parental criminality and instability (Balfe et al., 2019; Moodie, 2021), while peer relationships may be characterised by exclusion, isolation or bullying (Moodie, 2021). For some, as Balfe et al. (2019) observe, "their entire social ecosystem was damaged; for others, only part of it, though part here can refer to aspects of life that would ordinarily be considered to be essential for children's health and wellbeing" (p. 188).

Understanding these intersecting vulnerabilities demands a move beyond criminological paradigms that isolate behaviours from their developmental and social ecologies. We are not suggesting that HSB should be understood as a normative feature of sexual development, but rather as a manifestation of disrupted or distorted developmental processes, often shaped by trauma, adversity and fractured social and relational worlds. Recognising the behaviour in this

way situates it within, rather than outside, the continuum of childhood sexual behaviour and experience, emphasising the potential for recovery, change and growth when appropriate supports are provided. Multi-agency frameworks must therefore be informed by a developmental and rights-based understanding of childhood – one that recognises both the harm caused and the child's need for protection, intervention and inclusion. Re-centring HSB within the conceptual frame of childhood invites practitioners to hold both truths in view: the reality of the harm caused and the continuing personhood and developmental potential of the child displaying these behaviours. Doing so moves them out of the conceptual *sin bin* and back into the social and developmental spaces of childhood.

This reframing is increasingly reflected in contemporary policy and practice frameworks. In itself, Hackett's introduction of the concept of harmful sexual behaviour (2004) represented a clear move away from offender-based terminology and towards a developmental, welfare-oriented framing. Over time, this approach has gained traction internationally. It has been embedded within the NICE Public Health Guideline on HSB among Children and Young People (NICE, 2016), the Australian Royal Commission's specific volume on HSB (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017), and, most recently, in guidance from the Council of Europe (Hackett, 2025). Together, these developments have helped establish HSB as a mainstream child-welfare issue rather than a subfield of criminal justice.

Similar linguistic and conceptual shifts are emerging globally. In Chile, the 3D Intervention Model initially described children as sexual aggressors or offenders, but practitioners later recognised that nearly all such children had themselves experienced violence, neglect or abandonment. As the programme director explained, "we started to talk about their behaviour instead, because behaviours can be changed," Family For Every Child (2022a). This reframing was subsequently adopted into Chilean national policy and extended to Guatemala, Mexico and Colombia, where responses moved from criminalisation to rehabilitation and protection (Family for Every Child, 2022a, 2022b). In India, Reddy and Suresh (2024) observed similar tensions, noting that responses often "swing from being overly retributive and punitive to merely offering generic counselling" and called for approaches grounded in childhood development rather than criminalisation. In the Philippines, while the phrase "minor perpetrators who committed child sexual abuse" (Asuncion et al., 2022) persists, emerging discourse increasingly highlights environmental and relational factors shaping behaviour – echoing the "disrupted sociologies" described by Balfe et al. (2019).

These examples illustrate a growing international movement towards developmentally and contextually informed understandings of HSB. At its heart lies the conceptual and ethical imperative to reclaim childhood as the central frame for interpretation and response. HSB represents a profound developmental challenge for those who cause harm as well as those harmed by it. The Children's Commissioner for England (2023), for instance, highlights close links between early exposure to pornography and the sexual behaviours of young people that replicate abusive or exploitative content. Supporting children to navigate sexual development safely and to express sexuality in healthy, non-harmful ways, is therefore a societal priority.

Terminology also reflects wider cultural framings of childhood. Child is often associated with innocence and dependency, while young person or youth implies growing agency and responsibility. Yet such linguistic distinctions are inconsistent with international legal definitions that recognise everyone under 18 as a child (UNCRC, 1989). This creates a grey

zone in which adolescents, particularly those aged 16–17, may fall through protective gaps, treated punitively as adults despite being legally children. These distinctions risk reproducing the very *sin bin* dynamic discussed earlier, where children are neither fully seen as children nor as adults, and where language itself becomes a mechanism of exclusion.

Ultimately, the task is not simply to replace one set of pathologising labels with another but to re-establish the conceptual ground on which children stand. Reclaiming the framework of childhood means viewing these children as developing beings within social and moral contexts – capable of harm, responsibility and change. This reframing requires professionals to hold both truths in view: the reality of the harm caused and the continuing personhood and rights of the child displaying these behaviours. The next sections explore how theories from childhood studies further illuminate this shift, through concepts of temporality, spatiality and agency in children's lives.

4. Entangled childhoods: adult anxieties and the promise of childhood studies

In the preceding sections, we traced how understandings of HSB in childhood were shaped by criminological and psychological traditions, how the language of "offending" has gradually given way to developmental and welfare framings and how empirical research has revealed the diversity and complexity of this population. In this section, we move the argument forward by considering what critical attention to childhood itself and how insights from the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies can offer to this debate. We argue that even as the field of HSB shifts conceptually, adult perspectives continue to dominate its moral and institutional architecture. Exploring how childhood and adulthood are co-constructed exposes both the limits of current thinking and new possibilities for more relational, developmentally attuned practice.

Our understandings of children who display HSB are inseparable from adult social, moral and institutional frameworks. As Winnicott (1984, p. 99) observed, there is "no such thing as a baby" as the infant cannot be understood outside their relationship with a caregiver. Similarly, ideas of children and childhood are always co-constructed with ideas of adults and adulthood. Children's minds and bodies become the focus of adult scrutiny and projection, reflecting broader struggles over morality, control and sexuality. Recognition of children's sexual subjectivity often provokes moral panic because it symbolises both a loss of innocence and an affront to adult comfort (Egan & Hawkes, 2009; Nakata, 2015). The child is thus imagined less as "being" in the present than as "becoming" a future adult whose sexuality must be managed to preserve innocence. Protectionist narratives, though well-intentioned, can obscure children's lived experiences and diminish their developmental agency.

The "adult gaze" therefore holds paradoxical power: it protects, yet it also constructs the child as a problem to be managed. Jackson and Scott (2015, p. 42) note that adult understandings of childhood are "filtered through the lens of adult sexual understanding" and shaped by "adult sexual scripts" that differ profoundly from children's own perspectives. This dissonance unsettles adult identities, stirring nostalgia for innocence and anxiety about its loss. As Epstein et al. (2012, p. 253) observe, there is "a disconnect between the way sexuality is lived in the everyday social and cultural worlds of girls and young women, and boys and young men, and the contemporary political terrain

in which voice, agency and experience are exploited by different interest groups as leverage towards realising particular visions (utopias?) of childhood and society". As such, if idealised innocence offers a utopia then children who display HSB may represent a vision of dystopia threatening adult notions of what it is to be a child rendering them as the "unchildlike child" (Aitken, 2002, p. 146).

These anxieties are not merely individual or cultural; they are embedded in professional systems that oscillate between care and control, protection and punishment (McAlinden, 2018; Piper, 2000). Adults frequently perform their moral authority through benevolence – protecting, rescuing or reforming children – but, as Faulkner (2011, p. 103) warns, "invoking the idea of innocence is not only a means of treasuring children but also an instrument of social control". Efforts to defend childhood can therefore reinforce adult power and obscure children's own meanings and needs. Cook (2009, p. 9) calls this a "conceptual hazard" in childhood studies when a child is not seen as a child stressing that "keeping children as children by defending their childhood is an adult priority".

Bringing the insights of childhood studies to the field of HSB makes these dynamics visible. Theories of childhood as social constructs (Jackson & Scott, 2015) and of children as active social agents challenge the binary between innocence and knowingness, vulnerability and responsibility. They invite us to view children who display HSB as situated within relational, developmental and structural contexts rather than as isolated moral subjects. Understanding HSB through this lens does not deny the reality of harm or the need for accountability; rather, it recognises that children's capacity for responsibility is evolving and contextual. It also foregrounds the adult role not as a neutral arbiter of morality but as a participant in a shared relational process.

Reframing HSB through the critical study of childhood therefore extends beyond semantics. It demands reflexivity about how adults' own anxieties and institutional power shape the conditions of response. Holding both the child and the behaviour in view, acknowledging harm while sustaining recognition of personhood, creates space for interventions that are proportionate, compassionate and developmentally informed. This understanding of entangled childhoods lays the conceptual foundation for practice frameworks that prioritise children's rights, relationships and long-term wellbeing.

5. Towards a childhood studies understanding of HSB

Professional understandings of HSB remain shaped by disciplinary siloes and by discourses hungry for risk prediction. As we have suggested above, this gaze tends to cast the child as a potential risky adult, narrowing attention to pathology and risk factors while neglecting present capacities, contexts and change (Nakata, 2015). As McCuish and Lussier (2017, p. 71) argue, we need a biopsychosocial account that situates behaviour in its developmental and social context rather than in the person alone. We believe that repositioning HSB within childhood studies helpfully surfaces three dimensions – temporality, spatiality and agency – that can reframe the problem and offer solutions:

5.1. Temporal childhoods: being and becoming

One of the central insights of childhood studies concerns the *temporality* of childhood – the tension between children as "beings" in their own right and as "becomings" oriented

toward the adults they will one day become (Prout & James, 2015; Uprichard, 2008). In policy and practice, the "becoming" child dominates as children are viewed through a future-focused lens that privileges prevention over understanding, seeing their current actions primarily as predictors of later risk. This orientation is particularly evident in HSB discourse, where the "young abuser" has often been constructed as a proto-offender, a future adult criminal in embryo.

Such framings ignore children's present lived experiences and the relational and environmental contexts that shape their actions. The fear that today's "risky" child will become tomorrow's dangerous adult fuels surveillance and control, while diminishing recognition of children's resilience and capacity for growth (Parton, 2010). As Garside (2009, p. 14) notes, interventions often target "risks posed by children and young people" rather than the "risky social arrangements" that shape their behaviour. The consequence is a narrowing of vision: a preoccupation with imagined futures at the expense of children's current wellbeing and developmental needs.

Understanding the child as both *being* and *becoming* challenges this reductionism. It invites practitioners to hold two temporalities simultaneously – acknowledging responsibility for harm while remaining oriented toward healing and possibility. Similarly, Hackett et al. (2024) argue that interventions must focus not only on preventing recurrence but on fostering wellbeing and successful life trajectories thus "help children look forward and plan for their futures, both practically and emotionally, and build resilience as much as looking backwards to understand their past behaviour and its harmful nature" (p. 160). The paradigm shift, then, is not to deny risk but to place it within a developmental continuum where positive change is both expected and supported.

The risks of labelling are well documented within sociology. As Becker (1963) argues, labels applied to children can shape both how they are perceived and how they come to see themselves, potentially restricting the possibilities available to them. In the context of HSB, labels can easily overshadow a young person's broader identity and limit the hope that is essential for positive change. Similarly, Hunt et al. (2024) state that relying on rigid terms to describe a range of sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people limits understanding of their different pathways and needs. In Hackett et al. (2024) study on longer-term outcomes of adults who had displayed HSB in their childhoods, participants reflected on the sense of still being labelled with one participant describing feeling "branded" like an animal. The past century of anthropological study anchors our argument further situating childhood as a profoundly significant period of liminality and transition in which identities are fluid rather than fixed life stages (Padawer, 2017). Adolescence is not simply a bridge between childhood and adulthood but a "dynamic biocultural stage through which broader social, political and ecological processes can be understood" (Emmott et al., 2025, p. 3). Viewing children through a lens of *becoming* rather than *being* encourages us to avoid practices that lock a child's identity to a single moment, experience or behaviour.

5.2. Spatial childhoods: the "where" of harm

Childhood is not only temporal but spatial. Children's lives unfold within social and physical environments that shape, constrain and sometimes enable their actions. Yet professional systems tend to locate harm within individuals rather than the places and relationships that surround them. HSB is inherently spatial as it always occurs *somewhere*

– in homes, schools, care settings, online spaces – but these environments are often treated as backdrops rather than active components of the problem.

Lloyd (2022) argues that child protection must expand "from who to where", interrogating the social and cultural relations embedded in space. Beckett and Lloyd (2022, p. 73) similarly call for responses that problematise the contexts that enable adolescent harm rather than the young people themselves. This resonates with Smallbone and Rayment-McHugh's (2013, p. 9) ecological observation that, without systemic change, "these referred youth would soon be replaced by other children and youth who were continuing to be exposed to very similar family, peer, organisational, and community risk factors". A spatial lens thus redirects attention from the individual child to the wider socio-ecological conditions, includingfamilies, peer groups, digital cultures and institutions, that shape sexual learning and behaviour.

Contextual Safeguarding approaches (see Firmin, 2020) offer practical illustrations of this shift, emphasising the importance of intervening in the contexts where harm occurs. Moving work on HSB into these everyday spaces, such as schools, online environments, community settings, challenges the clinical and corrective logic of office-based interventions and instead situates prevention and response within children's lived worlds. Such place-based perspectives extend the concept of safeguarding from protecting individual children to reshaping the environments that sustain risk.

5.3. Agentic childhoods: vulnerability, responsibility and change

The final dimension concerns agency. Conventional binaries of the innocent/vulnerable child and the autonomous/responsible adult obscure the fluid ways in which children exercise agency in everyday life (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). When applied to HSB, these binaries become especially fraught with children who display harmful sexual behaviour often treated as *overly agentic* – as if acting with full adult intent – while simultaneously being denied the mitigating vulnerabilities that characterise childhood.

Research shows that young people themselves tend to accept responsibility for their actions but frame this responsibility relationally, through fairness, empathy and the effects of their behaviour on others (Smette et al., 2009; Such & Walker, 2004). For those who have displayed HSB, however, responsibility is often conflated with culpability. The moral weight of their actions is individualised, while the structural and relational factors that shaped them – trauma, neglect, peer pressure, exposure to pornography – are downplayed or ignored. This asymmetry reinforces what Cense (2019) highlight as children and young people's individual choices shaped by social and political context, whereby not all children have equal capacity to act differently given their social positions and "disrupted" social worlds (Balfe et al., 2019).

The concept of ambiguous agency (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) offers a more nuanced lens. It recognises that children's actions are situated within constraints – economic, familial, emotional, cultural – that both enable and limit their capacity to choose. Agency, in this sense, is neither pure autonomy nor pure passivity but a dynamic interplay between action and structure. Children who display HSB may exercise agency in harmful ways, but this does not nullify their need for understanding, support and protection. Recognising agency as relational and situational breaks the false dichotomy between "risky" *or* "at risk" and reorients practice toward relational accountability and repair.

Reframing HSB through the perspectives of temporality, spatiality and agency invites a more nuanced understanding of children's lives. It challenges professionals and policymakers to move beyond static or pathologising views of children as merely "at risk" or "risky", and to recognise the fluidity of their social worlds and moral development. Seeing children who display HSB as both "being" and "becoming" allows us to acknowledge their current needs while remaining attentive to their future possibilities. Similarly, exploring the spatial dimensions of harm reminds us that behaviours are shaped by the environments in which children live, learn and relate to others. Finally, recognising the complexity of children's agency resists simplistic binaries of victim and perpetrator, vulnerability and responsibility.

Taken together, these theoretical insights from childhood studies illuminate the importance of holding children within their developmental, social and moral contexts. They also point towards a practical reorientation – if children's lives are understood as dynamic and relational, so too must be our responses to them.

The challenge, then, is how to translate this conceptual shift into practice. What would it mean to build assessment, intervention and prevention frameworks that take childhood, rather than crime, as their primary reference point? The following section considers how a rights-based, developmental orientation might help to further reshape the professional landscape of response to HSB.

6. Towards a rights-based, developmental practice framework

A childhood-based framework acknowledges that children's lives are fluid, situated and shaped by relationships with others. It resists collapsing children into fixed categories of high, medium or low risk, or into simplistic binaries such as perpetrator and victim, innocent and deviant. This reconceptualisation does not diminish the seriousness of harm, but locates it within the moral and social complexity of growing up. In doing so, it opens new conceptual and practical pathways for prevention, intervention and justice that prioritise children's wellbeing alongside accountability.

In practice, this shift can support the ongoing reorientation of the entire system of response. It invites researchers and policymakers to reframe "success" not in terms of reduced recidivism but in improved developmental outcomes, practitioners to focus on relational repair and growth rather than compliance, and communities to recognise the collective responsibility for creating environments where children can develop safely. This multi-level framing positions HSB as a shared child welfare concern – a challenge for education, health, youth justice and community systems alike.

Practically, that means (1) proportionate responses oriented to wellbeing and future success, not just risk suppression, (2) context-changing interventions alongside individual work and (3) shared, relational responsibility across systems. The next section sets out this framework and its implications for assessment, intervention and prevention.

6.1. From risk to wellbeing

Current systems remain strongly influenced by the risk prevention paradigm. Assessment tools and intervention programmes often prioritise predicting recidivism over supporting recovery and resilience. As Hackett et al. (2024, p. 147) argue,

> simply stopping a child from continuing something that, even without intervention, is not likely to continue, is hardly a triumph, especially if in the process that child's broader life chances are ruined or severely inhibited by the consequences of our interventions and policies.

The overemphasis on actuarial risk can lead to interventions that regulate rather than rehabilitate, undermining children's opportunities to rebuild positive identities.

In contrast, wellbeing-oriented approaches begin from a different premise: that change is most likely when children feel safe, supported and hopeful. Contextual safeguarding approaches, restorative justice processes and trauma-sensitive education are all examples of practice that balance accountability with relational repair. Rather than viewing a child's behaviour as a predictor of future risk, they situate it as a communication of and signpost to unmet relational, social, emotional or developmental needs.

McPherson et al.'s (2024) scoping review of assessment and intervention approaches questions whether current models are "fit for purpose" in light of contemporary knowledge about trauma, development and social ecology. They call for a paradigm shift that would be "profound" where "rather than a narrow focus on harmful or problematic behaviour, a developmental and trauma informed approach would emphasise healing, growth and wellbeing" (p. 1594). The implication is clear: the most effective interventions will be those that hold safety and recovery in balance, addressing not only behaviour but the "disrupted sociologies" of children's lives (Balfe et al., 2019).

6.2. Reclaiming children's rights

Reframing HSB as a childhood issue also reasserts the centrality of children's rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) defines all under-18s as children and establishes their entitlement to protection, participation and provision. Yet in practice, these rights are often suspended when children cause harm, as though their actions forfeit their status as rights-holders. Lightowler (2020) argues that embedding children's rights within justice and welfare systems requires unambiguous recognition that young people in conflict with the law remain children first.

Operationalising rights means rethinking assessment and decision-making. Participation rights require that children's voices are included meaningfully – not only listened to but influential in shaping plans and interventions. Development rights require environments that support education, belonging and healthy relationships. Protection rights require that safeguarding frameworks balance safety with non-stigmatising inclusion. A rights-based framework thus becomes a practical blueprint demanding multi-agency processes that are transparent, participatory and proportionate.

Paralleling our contention that we cannot think about children and childhood without also adults and adulthood, we also should not ever think about children as *right's holders* separate from adults as *duty bearers*. Professionals working with children are duty bearers under the UNCRC (1989), meaning they hold legally binding obligations to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights on behalf of the State, ensuring children are rights holders who are empowered and protected from harm. The legal and ethical dimensions of the role of duty bearers could also be understood through sociologist Max Weber's ideas around "vocations" reflecting ethical responsibility and legitimising values, ideas

and social action in context (Kalberg, 2012). Held together, UNCRC duty-bearing and Weber's vocational ethic position safeguarding professionals as both legal and moral actors – entrusted with state authority, charged with ethical purpose and accountable for upholding children's rights with integrity and care. Viewing professionals as *duty bearers* rather than gatekeepers reframes the purpose of intervention.

Upholding rights means ensuring that children's voices are heard, that their needs are addressed alongside those of those harmed, and that punitive responses are balanced by proportionality and fairness. Rights-based approaches are not incompatible with public protection as they are, in fact, its ethical foundation. The recent full incorporation of the UNCRC into Scottish law and calls in Colombia to adopt child rights-based HSB policies (Family for Every Child, 2022b), demonstrate how legal and cultural frameworks can align practice with developmental principles.

6.3. Rethinking prevention and intervention

Reframing HSB through childhood studies invites prevention strategies that begin far earlier and reach much wider than traditional offender-focused interventions. Viewing HSB as a public health and child-wellbeing issue encourages population-level education on consent, respect and boundaries, early help for families and trauma-informed school environments that support children's sociosexual development safely (Letourneau et al, 2014; Kewley et al, 2023). It also enables integration with broader agendas around mental health, online safety, poverty reduction and gender equality.

Early-help systems are particularly crucial. Universal education programmes on relationships, digital literacy and empathy can normalise healthy sexual development and reduce stigma around help-seeking. Targeted family support can mitigate risk by addressing stressors such as parental mental health, domestic violence and poverty. Cross-sectoral partnerships between schools, health and youth services enable early recognition of patterns that might otherwise escalate into harm.

For practitioners, this perspective necessitates an ecological mindset: understanding children in relation to their environments, histories and networks. Multi-agency frameworks should move beyond case management to system learning – recognising patterns of vulnerability, culture and context. As Armstrong (2006) suggests, this requires rebalancing the relationship between *risk* and *hope* to understand that risk assessment alone cannot produce safety and that hope – the belief in children's capacity to change – is a necessary professional stance, not a naïve idealism.

Reframing HSB within a public health perspective also means signalling that HSB is not only a matter for specialist services responding after harm has occurred, but a signal of broader social and developmental vulnerabilities that can be addressed earlier and more widely (Rayment-McHugh and McKillop, 2025). Importantly, this reframing shifts responsibility from specialist teams to a shared, cross-sector endeavour, requiring coordinated input from education, health, social care, youth justice and community services (Russ et al, 2025). Multidisciplinary working becomes not simply a matter of case management, but a mechanism for aligning prevention, safeguarding and developmental support across systems.

6.4. Reclaiming the developmental lens

Anchoring HSB within the developmental life space of childhood restores attention to the trajectories that shape children's futures. Rather than focusing solely on interrupting negative behaviour, practice should prioritise fostering healthy sexual development, emotional literacy and social connection. This includes supporting parents and carers, who often experience isolation and shame when their child's behaviour causes harm. Interventions grounded in attachment, resilience and relational repair recognise that healing relationships are central to preventing reoccurrence.

Developmentally informed practice also requires practitioners to "look forwards" as well as "backwards" (Hackett et al., 2024). Understanding antecedents of harm remains essential, but so too is identifying what helps children achieve safe, fulfilling and meaningful lives after intervention. This dual perspective aligns with public-health thinking, which promotes wellbeing rather than simply preventing pathology.

6.5. A paradigm shift in professional identity

This conceptual reframing challenges professional identity itself. Practitioners working with HSB must hold tensions between protection and support, justice and care, accountability and compassion. Moving beyond the criminological gaze requires not only new tools but new ways of thinking which requires us to hold in mind both the child and their behaviour through a developmental approach committed to support children who have HSB "to go on to lead more prosocial, fulfilling and meaningful lives" (Hackett et al., 2024, p. 162). This cognitive and emotional labour compels reflective supervision, interprofessional dialogue and ongoing ethical vigilance.

This work is emotionally demanding. It requires practitioners to tolerate uncertainty, to sit with discomfort and to resist binary judgements. Reflective supervision, interprofessional dialogue and communities of practice become vital infrastructures for ethical containment and learning. Recognising, as above, that language itself constitutes an intervention reinforces the need for conscious, reflective communication in every interaction.

Embedding children's rights, development and wellbeing as organising principles for practice does not simplify the work, rather it makes its complexity visible. But it also opens up more hopeful horizons. Seeing these children as children – in all their complexity, potential and humanity – enables responses that are both morally grounded and empirically informed.

6.6. A paradigm shift in research

Finally, reframing HSB as a phenomenon of disrupted childhood may also carry important implications for how research in this field is conceptualised and conducted. Much existing research has been organised around forensic constructs and quantitative approaches, with recidivism positioned as the primary outcome and risk prediction as the dominant analytic goal. A childhood-centred paradigm instead calls for research design that prioritise developmentally meaningful outcomes, including wellbeing, relational repair, educational engagement, psychosexual development and safety within children's everyday

contexts, while still attending to harm reduction. It also opens the HSB field more explicitly to childhood studies research paradigms, which foreground children's lives as socially situated, relational and evolving, rather than as fixed objects of risk assessment. This shift requires greater attention to diversity and context, avoiding approaches that reify fixed offender identities or locate causality solely within the individual child. Methodologically, it supports more context-sensitive, systems-oriented and longitudinal designs capable of examining how family, peer, school and digital environments shape behaviour and change over time. Finally, it foregrounds the need for child-centred epistemologies that take children's lived experiences, meanings and agency seriously, alongside ethical reflexivity about how research categories and outcome measures may themselves reinforce stigma or limit possibilities for transformation. These include enabling children's participation in research to enhance knowledge about harm and abuse on HSB while balancing safety and risk for all involved in the research process (Cairns et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

Harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children remains one of the most emotionally charged and conceptually complex areas of child welfare and protection. Tracing its epistemological roots reveals how criminological framings, grounded in adult models of offending, have long shaped professional and public understandings. These frameworks have displaced the developmental and sociological child from the centre of analysis, casting children who display HSB into what we have called a conceptual *sin bin* – neither fully child nor fully adult, excluded from both protection and understanding.

Repositioning HSB within the paradigm of childhood studies offers a different way forward. It allows us to hold together the child and the behaviour, recognising both the seriousness of harm and the developmental realities of those who cause it. This shift moves beyond risk prediction to focus on recovery, resilience and rights. It invites practice that is relational rather than reductionist and policy that recognises children's social and moral complexity rather than seeking to categorise or exclude them.

Recent scholarship and practice development illustrate the potential of this reframing. Research into developmental and trauma-informed interventions (Hackett et al., 2024; McPherson et al., 2024) points to the importance of fostering wellbeing as much as preventing recidivism. Embedding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) in law and policy – as in Scotland and parts of Latin America – reinforces the principle that children who harm others remain, first and foremost, children. Viewing professionals as duty-bearers rather than controllers redefines intervention as an act of care and responsibility rather than regulation alone.

Reconstructing HSB as a phenomenon of childhood also demands reflexivity from adults – as researchers, practitioners and citizens. Our responses reveal as much about our anxieties and ideals of childhood as they do about the children themselves. Recognising this entanglement does not weaken professional objectivity; it strengthens it, grounding our work in humility and empathy. To move children out of the conceptual *sin bin* is not to deny harm or diminish responsibility. It is to insist that all children – including those whose behaviours disturb us most – are entitled to development, dignity and hope.

Taken together, this reframing does not seek to replace existing definitions of HSB, but to reposition how the phenomenon is understood and studied. For research, it calls for

approaches that foreground childhood, development, relationships and context, rather than treating HSB as an early manifestation of adult deviance. For policy, it situates HSB within child wellbeing, public health and rights-based frameworks, emphasising prevention, proportionality and long-term outcomes. For practice, it reinforces the need to hold both the child and the behaviour in mind, supporting accountability while prioritising developmental repair, relational and contextual safety and future wellbeing.

Most significantly, the paradigm shift we advocate is not toward denial or minimisation, but towards an approach that acknowledges harm, complexity and potential simultaneously. Repositioning children who display HSB unambiguously as *children* – situated within the life space of childhood – reconnects the field with its moral and developmental foundations. Grounding practice in children's rights and holistic, contextually informed approaches enables professionals to hold risk and care together, rather than in opposition. This orientation offers a more integrated and hopeful future: one in which preventing harm includes ensuring that all children, regardless of their behaviour, are afforded the dignity, protection and possibility that childhood should guarantee.

Author contributions

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