

# What can I do?

Protecting your child from sexual abuse



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**As a parent, knowing or suspecting that your child is being sexually abused can be incredibly traumatic. It can be difficult to know how to begin to do something about it.**

We understand that reporting your concerns is not easy, particularly when the abuser is someone that you know and trust. However, to protect your child, it is vital that you do speak out.

Sexual abuse is currently under reported, but we know from our work with children that it's crucial they have a chance to seek any help and support they may need. Coping with sexual abuse alone or burying the problem doesn't help. And in some cases, it can also mean children are left in abusive situations.

When you report abuse, professionals that you speak to, including those who work for the NSPCC, social services and the police, will be experienced at helping children who have been sexually abused. They will understand how difficult it has been for you.

This guide provides you with answers to some of the questions you may have. It draws on our experience working with families to rebuild relationships and keep children safe from sexual abuse.

You will also find details of other people that can help you and your child in the directory at the back of this book.

Some parents and young people who are recovering from sexual abuse have helped us by sharing their stories and advice in this booklet. All names have been changed to protect their identities, with their agreement.

# Spotting the signs

## *“Is this sexual abuse?”*

Child sexual abuse happens when a child or young person is forced, or enticed, to take part in sexual activities. No matter the level of violence, and regardless of the child’s awareness or agreement to what’s happening, it is sexual abuse.

It may involve physical contact such as touching a child’s genitals or private parts for the abuser’s sexual pleasure, making a child touch someone else’s genitals, playing sexual games or having sex by putting objects or body parts inside the mouth, anus or vagina of a child.

Sexual abuse also includes things that don’t involve contact, such as showing a child pornography, encouraging a child to take part in the making of sexual images, watching sexual acts, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways. Abuse can take place in person or online, through internet based technology or a website your child uses.

Abusers might blackmail a child into sharing information. They may also spend time building up a relationship with a child, with a view to abusing them at some stage. This is known as grooming and is also a crime.

Sadly, children of all ages, including very young children, and children of all abilities can be abused. Disabled children are more vulnerable, which may be because they are more dependent on adults, and in some cases have less awareness of what is happening or can’t easily tell others what has happened. Lonely children may be more vulnerable through their need to be close to or be noticed by others.

If you are worried, it is important that you seek professional advice – if you haven’t already. If you are not sure what is happening or what to do, contact the NSPCC. Our trained counsellors offer expert help, advice and support 24/7. Call **0808 800 5000**, text **88858**, email **help@nspcc.org.uk** or visit **www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline**

You can also call the police – see page 15 of this guide for the number to contact them when reporting abuse.

**Working out what is going on, especially if your child won’t talk or is too young to communicate what is happening, can be very difficult. The signs of sexual abuse are not always easy to spot.**

# “What signs might I see in my child?”

Changes in your child's behaviour may be the first indicator you have that something is wrong.

All children are different and behave in different ways, but you may have noticed that something has changed. Children can show signs of sexual behaviour from pre-school age right up to their teenage years. Many are normal and healthy, but some signs may give you cause for alarm.

Children with learning disabilities may vary in their development and you may need expert advice on your concerns.

Consider whether their behaviour is age appropriate. For more information on normal sexual development of children visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice)

## As a general rule:

- Pre-school children (up to five years) should not be talking about sexual acts or using sexually explicit language, having physical sexual contact with other children or showing adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge.
- School-age children (six to 12 years) should not be masturbating in public or showing adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge.
- Adolescents (13 to 16 years old) should not be masturbating in public or having sexual contact with much younger children or older adults.

## At any age, certain changes in behaviour can indicate that there's a problem, such as:

- having nightmares or sleeping problems

- becoming withdrawn or very clingy
- changes in their personality; they might seem insecure
- outbursts of anger
- using toys or other objects in a sexual way
- sudden changes in their eating habits
- showing an inexplicable fear of particular places or people
- going back to younger behaviours, such as thumb sucking or bedwetting
- becoming secretive and reluctant to share things with you.

In isolation, setbacks like this might seem like part of your child's normal development. But if you see your child behaving in more than one of these ways, it may be a sign that something is wrong and you should seek help.

Contact the NSPCC for help, advice and support or call the police (see page 15 for contact details).

## You must seek medical advice immediately if you see physical signs, such as:

- unexplained soreness or bruises around the child's genitals
- symptoms of sexually transmitted infections.



*"I've noticed certain things about a person that's close to my child. Could they be an abuser?"*

Unfortunately, abusers look like any other person and may be either male or female. They are often someone who is close to your child and family, a parent or parent's partner, a friend or relative, or a trusted person such as a babysitter or club leader. Knowing the difference between a close relationship and an inappropriate one can be difficult, particularly if they have gained your trust.

Sexual abusers may build a relationship with you over a period of time in order to build trust for you to allow them to be close to your children. Don't be afraid to trust your instincts – talk to someone if you are worried.

**You might be worried if another person:**

- refuses to allow your child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters
- displays physical affection such as kissing, hugging or wrestling even when the child clearly does not want it
- takes too much interest in the sexual development of your child or teenager
- wants time alone with your child with no interruptions
- wants to spend most of their spare time with your child or has little interest in spending time with people their own age
- regularly offers to babysit the children for free or take children on overnight outings alone

- buys your children expensive gifts or gives them money for no apparent reason
- frequently walks in on your children or teenagers in the bathroom
- treats a particular child as a favourite, making them feel 'special'.

**As their parent, your children depend on you for safety and you have every right to address any suspicions you have. You can always contact the NSPCC to talk to someone, even if you're not certain whether the relationship is inappropriate. Our trained helpline counsellors can talk you through your worries and help you take appropriate action. Alternatively there is a list of other people that can help you at the end of this leaflet.**



### **Relationships between peers**

It is increasingly recognised that sexual abuse can and does take place between peers, sometimes when they are in a relationship.

The age of sexual consent (including same sex relationships) is 16, across all four nations of the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). However, we know adolescents begin to experiment sexually with those of a similar age before then and can be at risk of pressure from peers.

When there is a big age difference in an adolescent relationship this is a particular issue. Sometimes young people's relationships may start off "normally" but become abusive when one partner starts controlling the other, forcing or persuading him or her to do things they don't want.

Encourage your child to wait until they're mature enough to have a sexual relationship and help them recognise the signs of abuse.

You can find more guidance on talking to your child about sex and on peer sexual abuse on our website at [www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice)

## *"Why might my child be unwilling to tell me about being sexually abused?"*

There are many reasons why children don't talk about sexual abuse. Young children sometimes don't know how to tell you what is happening, and older children may have reasons to be afraid to speak.

Sadly three-quarters of children who are abused do not tell anyone about it and many keep their secret all their lives. In 2000 a study was conducted by the NSPCC. The children interviewed explained the reasons they felt unable to tell which included:

*"it was nobody else's business"*

*"didn't think it was serious or wrong"*

*"didn't want parents to find out"*

*"didn't want friends to find out"*

*"didn't want the authorities to find out"*

*"was frightened"*

*"didn't think would be believed"*

*"had been threatened by abuser"*

Child Maltreatment in the UK, NSPCC 2000



# If your child tells you about abuse

*“How should I react if my child tells me they have been sexually abused?”*

*“The abuser was like part of our family and we’re a close family; he was almost like another son for mum. At first she asked me if I was sure, but of course nine year old boys don’t make this sort of thing up, so she knew I was telling the truth.”*

*Jake, who was abused from the age of six by his teenage babysitter*

Managing your reaction when facing something as upsetting as this is difficult.

Hearing something like this will naturally leave you feeling shocked and very distressed. You may find what you are told difficult to believe, but it is important not to react in a way that might add to your child’s distress. You need to believe your child and act upon the information they have given you. They are looking to you for help.

## **Tell your child that he or she has done the right thing in telling you.**

Be careful not to give your child the impression that you blame them, especially if the abuse occurred because he or she disobeyed your instructions (for example, going out without your permission). Find a way to let them know that you are really glad they have told you, how difficult it

must have been to deal with it on their own, and that you are now there to help them. They may also need to hear that you love them.

*“Sometimes you’ve kept it a secret for so long that you’re scared of what will happen and what people’s reactions will be. My advice to parents would be to believe their child and listen to what they are saying. That was something I was really afraid of; that no one would believe me. But knowing my parents did made it a whole lot easier.”*

*Hannah, who was abused by a trusted family member*

Sometimes children don’t tell, or wait to tell parents about abuse. It might leave you struggling to understand why they didn’t feel they could share it with you. Children or teenagers can end up feeling like they were somehow responsible – perhaps because they took part in sexual images or that they led the relationship and things ‘got out of hand’ – and that they themselves would get into trouble. The more you try to understand the pressures they were under, the easier it will be for you to offer the right support.



"If they want to talk about their ordeal they will, but they need support and don't need to be pushed or questioned about it as for some it takes time before they are ready to speak about it."

*Lucy, who was abused by a person who was close to the family*

"For me one of the hardest things was having three children affected by it. I had to try to be strong but make them understand that I did believe them."

"Support your children but don't push them for information about what happened. Work at your child's pace and let them know that you are there for them. When they are ready to speak, they will know they can come to you. Ask them if they need counselling and support them through that in a way they feel comfortable with."

*Lucy's mum*

## *“The abuser is someone I know. Do I confront them?”*

Do not confront the abuser yourself. It may put you or your child in an unsafe situation, or give the person an opportunity to cover up the abuse.

It's an unfortunate fact that sexual abuse is often committed by someone the child knows. If the abuser is a relative or someone you thought you could trust, it can leave you with very powerful and conflicting emotions about the abuse.

Make sure you use expert support to help you cope with these feelings. You can find contact details for the NSPCC and other people that can help on pages 15-17.

## *“Should I report it?”*

It is hard to make the decision to report sexual abuse. You may have many fears that are stopping you. However, you must still get professional advice to protect your child. You may also need support yourself – and the directory at the back of this guide gives details of people who can help you.

The most important action to take now is to make sure the sexual abuse stops. Get professional advice about protecting your child by:

- contacting the NSPCC
- contacting the police
- contacting your local social services.

**Remember, although your first concern may be to stop the abuser harming your child, by reporting the abuser your actions will help to protect other children.**

For information on what happens after you have reported abuse you can go to [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

# Moving forward after abuse

## “What can I do to help my child now?”

You might be thinking about what, as a parent, you can do for your child when any kind of resolution seems a long way off.

Finding support for yourself can give you the strength to be there for your child. Local services such as your family doctor, school nurse, health visitor or designated child protection teacher may know of local organisations that offer specialist help. You can also contact the national organisations listed at the end of this booklet.

*“I got really anxious waiting and waiting and worrying about my daughter. Things seemed to be moving very slowly so I called the NSPCC to see if there was anything else I could do. I had already stopped the contact between my daughter and her father before she told me about the abuse.”*

*I was at the end of my tether because I really didn't know what to do or how to help my daughter move on. She's only five. When I called and talked it through with the helpline counsellor, he pointed out that I shouldn't blame myself for what happened and that it wasn't my fault. He showed me there was something I could do now by trying to be there for my daughter. He gave me ideas on how to support her and where to go for help and who to speak to.”*

*Terri, whose daughter was abused by her father*

## “Does my child need therapy?”

The level of distress a child suffers depends on how long they were abused for, how often it happened, their relationship to the abuser and whether they were believed when they spoke out.

Without the right help, sexually abused children could develop mental health problems lasting into adulthood. Sexual abuse can damage children emotionally and psychologically. Sexually abused children may act out through violence or withdraw into themselves. In some cases, they may self-harm or become suicidal. But with the right help and support children can make a good recovery.

We know the things that really help children recover include being believed when they speak out and having a parent or carer who continues to support them.

Therapy and services for children who have been sexually abused vary around the UK. Some places are better served than others. If specialist therapy is not available, there may still be other support services that can help. You can contact the NSPCC for information about services that are available in your area.

When your child is able to attend therapy, be aware that it may take months to reach a point where you are able to see it is helping. They still may not want to talk about what has happened with you, but when and if they do want to talk, be ready to listen and be supportive.



## *“What should I tell other people?”*

Your other children and family members may want to know what has happened. You need to think carefully about what you tell them, depending on their levels of maturity and relationships within the family. They will want to hear the story from you before they hear it anywhere else.

You will need to talk to the child who has been abused to find out what they feel and what they want you to tell the rest of the family. You might find it useful to talk to a professional to plan what you say and when, before you tell other members of the family.

Sometimes other people can be judgmental, either about how it happened or about your actions on discovering the events. Others may be unsure of what to say and afraid of upsetting you. Sometimes this can result in family members and friends withdrawing or being critical.

If you experience this, remember that you have done the right thing by reporting the abuse. The most important thing is not what others

think or how they react, but that you have protected your child. You may find it useful to contact some of the groups that help victims of child sexual abuse and their families listed on page 15-17.

*“My daughter is much happier now and more confident. She has made loads of friends and wants to go to school. She’s more like the person she was when she was a baby and the signs that there was something wrong with her but she wouldn’t tell me about, they are all slowly, gradually going away.”*

*Terri*

## *“Will my child go on to abuse children?”*

This can be a worry for parents, but in the majority of cases children who have been sexually abused do not go on to become abusers themselves.

By recognising and stopping the abuse and getting the right support for your child, you can help them grow to have healthy relationships in the future.

## *“What if my child does display harmful sexual behaviour?”*

Occasionally children display harmful sexual behaviour toward other children. This can be the case whether they have been sexually abused themselves or not.

If this is a worry you have about your child you must seek professional help. The NSPCC, along with mental health services and other voluntary organisations, offer treatment programmes for these young people. For advice and support, contact the NSPCC (see page 15 for details).

## *“Will my family be broken up?”*

When you report the abuse, the first consideration will be the safety and welfare of your child and any other children in your household.

This will mean ensuring the abuser is kept away from your children. Removing the abuser is the priority. If you cannot keep your children safe from contact with the abuser, it may be necessary to find an alternative place for them to stay. Your child will need you to provide reassurance, comfort and ‘normality’. Wherever possible, going about your everyday routines will help you and your child to cope.



## "How do I keep my child safe from further sexual abuse?"

Re-establishing ways of talking to your child about sex can help your child understand about his or her body and about what is sexually healthy. Talking about this may be difficult at first, but it can play an important part in protecting your child against abuse and developing your relationship with your child. For example, your child needs to understand about private parts of their body, what is appropriate touching and what is not.

**There are story books that can help you talk to your child about sexual abuse and gently introduce complex subjects. The NSPCC website features a reading list of recommended stories. Visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice) to see this list.**

You can always contact the NSPCC, whenever you have doubts or need support. Our trained counsellors are ready to offer expert help, advice and support 24/7. It's free, and you don't have to say who you are. Call **0808 800 5000**, text **88858**, email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) or visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

### **Keep your child safe when they are online or using a mobile phone.**

For advice and guidance on how to protect children using digital networks, go to [www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/parentingadvice)

**Make sure your child knows that they have the right to refuse to do anything they feel is wrong or that frightens them.** Stress that they should not hesitate to tell you or another trusted adult if something happens that they don't like.

**Maintaining a trusting and open relationship** with your children is going to help you all look forward as a family.

*"Starting therapy and beginning the process to moving on can be really difficult. My mum and dad were both extremely supportive of me and took me and collected me from my sessions which was really important as sometimes it was very distressing. Just knowing that they were going to be there for a cuddle but not to ask questions was very special and reassuring."*

*Hannah*



# Where to go for information and advice

**In an emergency (if a child is being abused or is in trouble now) call the police on 999. If you want to report an abuse that has already happened, or a suspicion of abuse, call the police on 101 in England and Wales or on 0845 600 8000 in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, call your local police station.**

## **NSPCC**

Helpline: **0808 800 5000**

24 hours a day

Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

Website: [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)

Text: **88858\***

You can contact the NSPCC if you are worried about the safety or welfare of your child. Our trained helpline counsellors are ready to offer expert help, advice and support 24/7. We can also take action on your behalf if you are concerned that a child is being abused or is at risk of abuse. It's free to contact us and you don't have to say who you are.

The call will not appear on your bill.

If you are deaf or hard-of-hearing you can contact us via textphone (minicom): dial 18001 before the full number 0808 800 5000. If you have a webcam you can also contact us via SignVideo using British Sign Language. See [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline) for further information.

\* Channel Islands and the Isle of Man: text 0778 620 0001.  
Texts will be charged at your standard network rate.

## **ChildLine**

If you are worried that your child has no one to talk to and doesn't want to talk to you, our ChildLine counsellors understand the sorts of problems your child might be worried about and are trained to help. They won't judge your child or put them down and they are not easily shocked. Instead, they will listen and help your child talk through their options.

Helpline: **0800 1111**

Website: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

**Freepost NATN1111  
London E1 6BR**

# Other sources of support

## **MOSAC**

Provides support for non-abusing parents and carers whose children have been sexually abused.

Helpline: **0800 980 1958**

Website: **[www.mosac.org.uk](http://www.mosac.org.uk)**

E-mail: **[enquiries@mosac.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@mosac.org.uk)**

## **NAPAC**

Supports survivors of childhood abuse, and supporters of survivors. Its helpline is open Monday to Thursday, 10am to 9pm and Friday 10am to 6pm.

Call **0800 085 3330** for free from landlines, 3, Orange and Virgin mobile phones.

Call **0808 801 0331** for free from O2, T-Mobile and Vodafone mobile phones.

Website **[www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)**

Email: **[support@napac.org.uk](mailto:support@napac.org.uk)**

## **Survivors UK**

Provides information, support and counselling for men who have been raped or sexually abused.

Helpline: **0845 122 1201** (see website for opening hours as they may vary)

Website: **[www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)**

Email: **[info@survivorsuk.org](mailto:info@survivorsuk.org)**

## **One in Four**

One in Four provides a range of services for the one in four people who have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18. It is run for and by people who have experienced sexual abuse.

Telephone: **020 8697 2112**

Website: **[www.oneinfour.org.uk](http://www.oneinfour.org.uk)**

Email: **[admin@oneinfour.org.uk](mailto:admin@oneinfour.org.uk)**

## Other useful services:

### Stop it Now! UK & Ireland

Stop it now! is a campaign which provides a confidential helpline for people who are unsure or worried about their own thoughts or behaviour towards children, or the behaviour of someone they know, whether they are an adult or a child.

**PO Box 9841  
Birmingham B48 7WB**

Helpline: **0808 1000 900**  
(Monday to Thursday 9am-9pm and  
Friday 9am-7pm)

Email: **help@stopitnow.org.uk**

Website: **www.stopitnow.org.uk**

### Everyman Project

The Everyman Project aims to help men to understand their angry thoughts and feelings, and to control their violent and/or abusive behaviours.

The Everyman Helpline is available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 6:30pm to 9pm, and is for men who are worried about their own behaviour, and anyone who is worried about somebody else's violent or abusive behaviour.

Call: **020 7263 8884**

Website: **www.everymanproject.co.uk**

### Domestic Violence Helpline

This free 24-hour helpline, (run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge), is a national service providing support, help and information for women experiencing domestic violence, their family, friends, colleagues and others calling on their behalf.

Helpline: **0808 2000 247**

Website: **www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk**

## Children's safety online:

### CEOP

This website is managed by the police and offers a place to report concerns about online activities but also offers help and advice to children and parents about safe internet use.


Website: **www.ceop.police.uk**

### UK Safer Internet Centre

A parents' guide to the technology that children use, highlighting the safety tools available and empowering parents with the knowledge they need to support their children to use these technologies safely and responsibly.

Website: **www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/a-parents-guide**

**Please contact the NSPCC if you would like further advice on other organisations that may be able to support you.**



**Worried about a child? Don't wait until you're certain, contact the NSPCC for help, advice and support.**

**Call 0808 800 5000**

**Text 88858**

**Email [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)**

**Visit [www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline)**

Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717. Photography by Jon Challicom, Gettyimages and iStockphoto, posed by models.  
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