

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

Communicating with children

A guide for education professionals
when there are concerns about
sexual abuse or behaviour



November 2022



About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre)

Our overall aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response, so that children can live free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse.

Who we are

We are a multi-disciplinary team, funded by the Home Office, hosted by Barnardo's and working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.

Our aims

Our aims are to:

- increase the priority given to child sexual abuse, by improving understanding of its scale and nature
- improve identification of and response to all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse
- enable more effective disruption and prevention of child sexual abuse, through better understanding of sexually abusive behaviour/perpetration.

What we do

We seek to bring about these changes by:

- producing and sharing information about the scale and nature of, and response to, child sexual abuse
- addressing gaps in knowledge through sharing research and evidence
- providing training and support for professionals and researchers working in the field
- engaging with and influencing policy.

For more information on our work, please visit our website:

www.csacentre.org.uk 

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Introduction

What is this guide about?

This guide aims to help anyone working in education provision in England and Wales to communicate with and support children in situations where sexual abuse is suspected or identified.



Sexual abuse can be difficult to think about and to talk about: it can feel complex, emotional and even scary. You might worry about ‘getting it wrong’, having to have difficult conversations, ‘opening a can of worms’, and not knowing what to say or how to respond. You might also worry about ‘contaminating evidence’ – saying the wrong thing to a child by asking a leading question which may jeopardise a criminal trial.

However, it is important to recognise that you can talk to a child in many ways without fear of affecting a criminal trial – and to remember that the child’s welfare should be the paramount consideration. Fear of getting it wrong can prevent you from asking children anything at all, yet research shows that they need ‘help to tell’.

“When abuse is happening to you, you feel very isolated. You know that you need to tell someone, or you may even feel this urge to tell someone, but you know you can’t because that fear will overrun your whole body and your mind.”

13-year-old girl quoted in Making Noise (Warrington et al, 2017).

The guide has been adapted from our publication *Communicating with Children: A Guide for Those Working with Children Who Have or May Have Been Sexually Abused*. We have also produced two other resources for schools which you may find helpful:

- **[Communicating with Parents and Carers: A Guide for Education Professionals When There Are Concerns about Sexual Abuse or Behaviour](#)** 
- **[Safety Planning in Education: A Guide for Professionals Supporting Children following Incidents of Harmful Sexual Behaviour](#)** 

To keep this guide easy to read, sources of information are not cited in the text but are listed in the **References** section.

How can this guide help you?

Prevalence studies for England and Wales suggest that 15% of girls and 5% of boys experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. Child sexual abuse is a hidden crime, however, and many who experience it do not report their experiences for years, if at all.

While there are many obstacles that get in the way of children telling others about their sexual abuse, many professionals who work with children lack the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to identify possible indicators of child sexual abuse and to respond effectively to them.

This guide explains what may be going on for children when they are being sexually abused; what prevents them from talking about their abuse; and what you can do to help them tell you what is happening. Setting out clear advice and dispelling some of the myths surrounding what can and should happen when children talk to professionals about sexual abuse, it will help you to:

- respond when you are concerned that a child is being sexually abused (because, for example, you have noticed a change in their behaviour)
- know what you should and should not do or say in your conversations with children
- consider the situation that each individual child is in, so you can plan your conversations with them
- understand the professional behaviours that can give children the confidence to tell
- know how to support children in school when they have experienced sexual abuse.

It also contains advice on addressing incidents of harmful sexual behaviour by children within the school environment.

Statutory safeguarding in England and Wales: a school context

Schools play a key role in managing risks to children and supporting them to keep them safe, as is highlighted in statutory guidance for schools.

The 2022 edition of ***Keeping Children Safe in Education*** , published by the Department for Education, states:

13. School and college staff are particularly important, as they are in a position to identify concerns early, provide help for children, promote children's welfare and prevent concerns from escalating.

[...]

17. All staff should know what to do if a child tells them he/she is being abused, exploited or neglected. Staff should know how to manage the requirement to maintain an appropriate level of confidentiality. This means only involving those who need to be involved, such as the safeguarding lead (or a deputy) and children's social care. Staff should never promise a child that they will not tell anyone about a report of any form of abuse, as this may ultimately not be in the best interests of the child.

18. All staff should be able to reassure victims that they are being taken seriously and that they will be supported and kept safe. A victim should never be given the impression that they are creating a problem by reporting abuse, sexual violence or sexual harassment. Nor should a victim ever be made to feel ashamed for making a report.

The 2022 edition of the Welsh Government's *Keeping Learners Safe*  states:

3.19 All those working in an education setting should ensure that the active offer principle of the use of the Welsh language is embedded in practice. The child should be asked which language they would prefer at the beginning of the process. This will ensure they are effectively able to articulate their concerns and able to receive services in their own language throughout the process.

3.20 Consideration should also be given to other language and cultural needs as talking about sensitive subjects in a second language can make the experience more traumatic. Having an understanding of cultural differences will also help the situation. Each local authority can provide advice to education settings on language support to children who do not have English or Welsh as their home language.

Definitions and language used in this guide

For the sake of simplicity, in this guide we generally use the term '**child**' to mean anyone under the age of 18. It is important, however, to remember that teenagers as well as younger children can experience child sexual abuse.

We use the term '**parents**' to encompass all parents/carers of a child – including biological parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, foster carers and other relatives who may be the child's main care-giver, such as grandparents.

We use '**school**' to refer to a child's place of learning, whether a school, a college or a pupil referral unit.


We have chosen to avoid some terms that are sometimes understood differently or that feel uncomfortable for some people:

- Instead of 'perpetrator', 'abuser' or 'sex offender', we talk about **the person who has sexually abused the child** or similar.
- Instead of 'peer-perpetrated abuse' or 'peer-on-peer abuse' by under-18s, we talk about **harmful sexual behaviour**.
- Instead of 'disclosing abuse', we refer to **telling a professional** or similar. Telling may involve verbal and/or non-verbal communication.

We use the term '**conversation**' when referring to professionals' communication with children, including in cases where the communication is non-verbal.



What is child sexual abuse?

The Department for Education's 2018 guidance [*Working Together to Safeguard Children*](#)  defines child sexual abuse as:


...forcing or enticing a child or young person [under the age of 18] to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include noncontact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

The Welsh Government uses a similar definition in its 2019 [*National Action Plan: Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse*](#) .

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

It is important to remember that some sexual behaviour is part of a child's normative, healthy, sexual development. Professor Simon Hackett has developed a continuum to describe the sexual behaviour of children:

- **Normal** – consensual, mutual, reciprocal and developmentally expected, with shared decision-making.
- **Inappropriate** – displayed in isolated incidents; generally consensual, reciprocal and acceptable within a peer group, but may be in an inappropriate context.
- **Problematic** – may be socially unexpected, developmentally unusual, and compulsive, but with no element of victimization; may lack reciprocity or equal power.
- **Abusive** – intrusive, with a victimising intent of outcome; often involves manipulation, coercion, or lack of consent.
- **Violent** – very intrusive and may have an element of sadism.

The continuum recognises that there are times when children's sexual behaviour is a cause for concern. In his contribution to the book [*Children Behaving Badly?*](#) , Hackett calls this 'harmful sexual behaviour', defining it as:

Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18-years-old, that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult.

If pre-adolescent children display sexual behaviour that is not 'normal', it is more likely to be inappropriate or problematic than abusive or violent. Young children may be 'acting out' abuse they have experienced themselves, or responding to other trauma and neglect; in some situations, they may use sexualised behaviour as an extension of bullying. The behaviour of very young children is often referred to as 'sexually reactive'; you should always consider whether the child has themselves been sexually abused.

The early teens are the peak time for the occurrence of harmful sexual behaviour, most of which is displayed by boys. There are some gender differences: girls who display harmful sexual behaviour tend to do so at a younger age than boys. It is, however, important to recognise that harmful sexual behaviour can occur within same sex relationships for both boys and girls, and may be displayed by those who identify as transgender or non-binary.

Key messages for school staff

Few children tell anyone that they have been sexually abused, and some face additional barriers in communicating their experiences. They need help to do so.

Children often show, rather than tell, that something is upsetting them. You are well placed to notice potential signs and indicators of child sexual abuse, and to talk to the child about these concerns.

If a child does tell someone they have been sexually abused, it is most likely to be someone they know and trust.

What can you do?

If you have any concerns about a child, speak to your safeguarding lead(s) so you can plan how to explore these concerns with the child and/or their parents.

If a child tells you they have been sexually abused, stay calm and continue the conversation as privately as possible. Take care to:

- focus on what they are telling you, and avoid expressing any judgement on their account or their feelings
- tell them that what has happened is not OK and should not have happened
- explain to them that you need to speak with at least one other person (your safeguarding lead) to ensure they are safe.

Once the child has chosen to tell you that they have been sexually abused, you are likely to be the best person to continue talking to them. Seek support from your safeguarding lead.

Action once the child has told about the abuse

Do not remove a child from a lesson as a reaction to an issue, unless it is to secure their immediate safety.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse are likely to need support in relation to their education. Whatever else is happening for the child, there is much that school staff can do to support them.

Your school has a safeguarding/child protection policy which sets out how the school will work with outside agencies where necessary. Ensure you are familiar with the policy and always act in line with it.

Reflection point

It's natural to worry about getting it wrong, but – even though we might hope it isn't sexual abuse, and it might be difficult and uncomfortable to explore – we need to ask ourselves not 'What if I'm wrong?' but 'What if I'm right? What if this child is being sexually harmed? What do we need to make this child safer?'

1

Why is it difficult for sexually abused children to tell anyone?

Few victims of child sexual abuse tell about it at the time it is taking place. To be able to communicate effectively with a child who is or may be experiencing sexual abuse, you need to understand the many barriers to telling so you can help the child overcome them.

Remember, it is not a child's responsibility to safeguard themselves; if you have any concerns about a child, it is your duty to act on them.

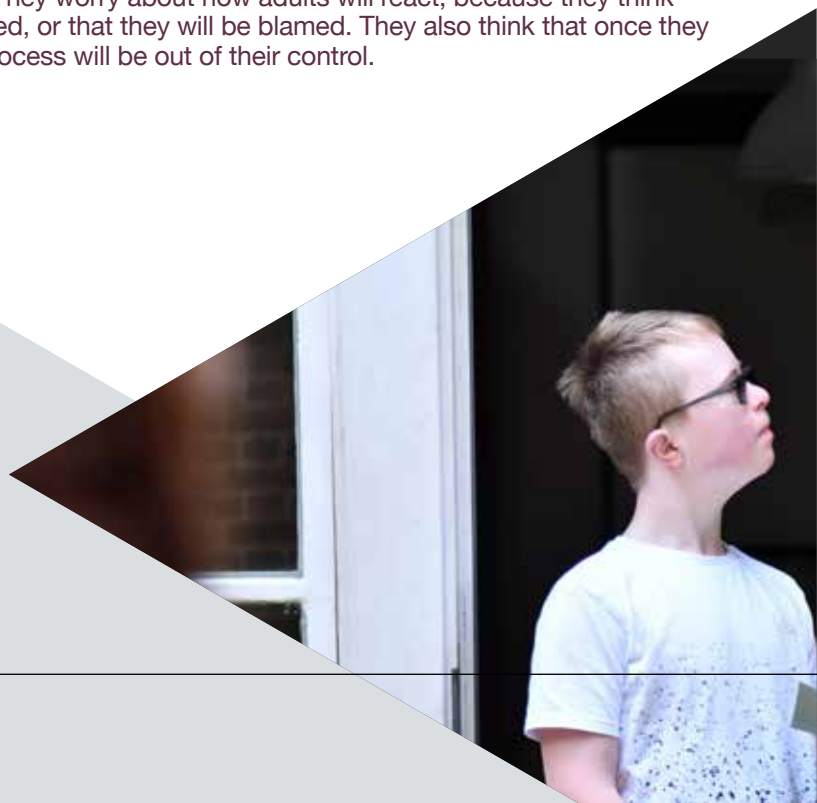
Common reasons for not telling

Every sexually abused child has their own reasons for not wanting to tell, but common reasons include:

- feeling embarrassed or ashamed by the abuse
- feeling responsible for the abuse
- fearing that they will not be believed if they tell (because, for example, the person who abused them has told them they won't be believed, or they have not been believed previously when they tried to tell)
- being threatened or manipulated by the person who abused them
- fearing other consequences of speaking out (such as the impact on the family, being removed from the family, and/or being ostracised by their peers)
- not having the language or the capacity to communicate verbally, or not knowing how to tell
- not recognising their experience as abusive.

Ofsted's 2021 [*Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges*](#)  noted:

Children and young people, especially girls, told us that they do not want to talk about sexual abuse for several reasons, even where their school encourages them to. For example, the risk of being ostracised by peers or getting peers into trouble is not considered to be worth it for something perceived by children and young people to be commonplace. They worry about how adults will react, because they think they will not be believed, or that they will be blamed. They also think that once they talk to an adult, the process will be out of their control.



Additional barriers faced by some children

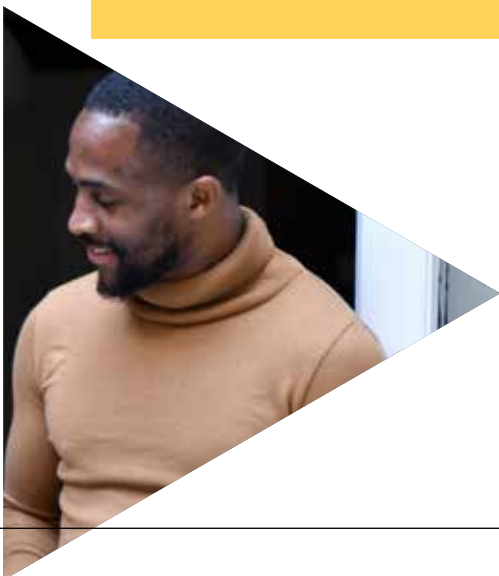
Some children may face additional barriers – based on their background, characteristics or circumstances – to telling about their experiences of sexual abuse. As school practitioners, it is important for you to consider how your own stereotypes and assumptions influence your interpretations and conclusions about a child's behaviour. Work with your colleagues to challenge assumptions about race, culture, ethnicity, sex, gender and sexual orientation so that you can recognise and respond to child sexual abuse.

You may not always be aware of the additional barriers that a child may face, but they are likely to notice how these themes are addressed in the curriculum and through their interactions with peers and staff members. This can influence whether a child will feel comfortable in speaking to you about their experiences. If a child speaks to you about sexual abuse, or you have concerns, it is important to consider the potential impact of additional barriers. Depending on your relationship with the child, you may be able to explore this sensitively with them.

Reflection point

Consider how sex/gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity and religion may create additional barriers for children to talk about abuse. Think about how school practice can help to reduce the impact of these barriers through your curriculum. Some considerations for sex/gender are set out below to help your thinking.

Barriers related to sex/gender	Interventions to help remove barriers
<p>Boys, for example, may be reluctant to talk about their experiences because of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• societal values regarding masculinity• societal myths that boys who are abused will go on to abuse• confusion and fear of being seen as gay if abused by a male. <p>Children who identify as transgender or non-binary may fear that they will experience transphobia.</p>	<p>Through your formal and informal curriculum, do you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• encourage and give space for boys to talk about their feelings?• challenge stereotypes and values about masculinity and sexuality?• encourage positive discussion about gender and sexual orientation?• challenge homo/bi/transphobia?



Family difficulties

Some children face additional barriers as a result of the difficulties their families are experiencing, such as:

- domestic abuse
- a parent or other family member with mental health difficulties or physical/ learning disabilities, particularly if the child has caring responsibilities as a result
- parental alcohol or substance misuse
- existing concerns about child neglect, emotional or physical abuse in the family.

These issues can make children particularly vulnerable, and can affect their ability, opportunity and confidence to talk to adults about their experiences of sexual abuse.

Reflection point

With colleagues, consider how stereotypes and assumptions can lead you to interpret behaviours and reach erroneous conclusions. Discuss w how to challenge misconceptions about race, culture, ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality, so that you can recognise and respond to child sexual abuse.

The school environment

The school environment can influence a child's confidence to tell a staff member about sexual abuse. Factors to consider include:

- the availability of opportunities for children to report sexual abuse
- the child's understanding of the school culture in relation to abuse
- access to different mechanisms for sharing their experiences (such as through a trusted adult, safe spaces, and online reporting mechanisms)
- any disciplinary issues faced by the child, which may make them less likely to believe that telling an adult will result in a positive action.

Children who experience trauma as a result of sexual abuse will often struggle to express calmly what is going on for them. In school, they may express their strong feelings through behaviours that can be difficult to manage, which may prompt a disciplinary response. The result can be a negative cycle of perceived misbehaviours followed by disciplinary responses.

It is easy to take a child's presenting behaviour at face value, without considering what may be causing it, or to attribute it to other causes (such as a disability; worries about exams, or changes in the home environment). Sexual abuse can be so hard to think about that school staff will initially attribute concerns to anything but sexual abuse.

Providing appropriate support and taking disciplinary measures are not mutually exclusive actions. They can occur at the same time if necessary.

Who do children choose to talk to?

Teachers are the professionals whom sexually abused children most commonly tell about their experiences. It may take a long time for the child to build the trusted relationship with a teacher in which they feel comfortable talking about sexual abuse, particularly if they have had previous negative experiences of authority figures.

Research has shown that children who try to tell through behaviour rather than verbally want their teachers to notice signs such as self-harm, eating disorders, acting out in class, school attendance, and being alone and withdrawn at school.

In response to Ofsted's [***Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges***](#), many schools have set up online reporting systems for children. The online context can play a crucial role in supporting children to report and share their concerns and fears.

The process of telling

It can be helpful to think about a child communicating their experience of sexual abuse as a 'process': they will rarely tell everything about the abuse in one go. The child may move from unintentional and indirect methods of communication, such as behavioural manifestations, through to more direct means such as purposefully or accidentally telling someone what is happening.

Children are usually torn between needing to tell (to make the abuse stop and to get support) and wanting to keep the secret (for fear of the consequences of telling).

The process of telling a teacher or another member of school staff is influenced by the relationship the child feels they have with that adult. They need to trust the relationship and feel comfortable talking about sexual abuse with the adult.

Having made the decision to tell someone, the child is likely to need help to communicate. This is a two-way process and needs careful consideration.

Children have identified that their experience of talking to someone about sexual abuse was positive when:

- they were believed
- some action was taken to protect them
- they received emotional support.

Noticing the signs and indicators that a child may be being sexually abused, and giving the child the opportunity to talk to you, are key to ensuring their safety and wellbeing. Our resource [***Signs and Indicators: A Template for Identifying and Recording Concerns of Child Sexual Abuse***](#) can help you understand what the potential signs and indicators of abuse are.

Triggers for telling within school

A child may be prompted to tell about their abuse spontaneously.

Reflection point

Think about the possible triggers that may prompt a child to tell someone about their abuse. Consider the role of a trusted adult in this process. How might lesson content (especially RSE), TV and social media activity influence a child talking to someone?

Alternatively, a child's communication about their abuse may not be spontaneous at all. It may occur only when prompted – for example, when a teacher notices that something may be wrong and asks about it.

The 2022 edition of ***Keeping Children Safe in Education***  states:

19. [...] It is also important that staff determine how best to build trusted relationships with children and young people which facilitate communication.

The 2022 edition of ***Keeping Learners Safe***  states:

6.6 Prevention work should be integrated, where practical, into all aspects of an education setting's life and addressed at all appropriate points in the curriculum. This will help create a positive ethos where learners have a safe environment in which to learn and have the opportunity and confidence to share concerns with others.



Giving children the confidence to tell you they have been sexually abused

2

Noticing the signs

As explained in **Chapter 1**, most children do not talk about their experiences of abuse at the time it is happening. You must therefore ensure that you are looking out for the signs that abuse may be happening, and respond when you have concerns.

To help you understand what the potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse are, see our resource **[Signs and Indicators: A Template for Identifying and Recording Concerns of Child Sexual Abuse](#)** .

Creating a safe environment

School is a place where children spend much of their time. As such, it needs to be a safe environment where a child:

- has opportunities to speak with staff they trust
- has access to reporting systems that they feel confident about
- knows what actions will be taken if they share their experiences or concerns.

It may be useful to talk to children in your school about how they feel when they are in school. Having frequent, open conversations with children, while remaining respectful about their views and opinions, will help to create the climate for you to build trusting relationships. You might want to ask questions such as:

“Where (in school) do you feel safest?”

“Where do you feel unsafe?”

“What areas outside school do you most worry about?”

“What do you look forward to in school?”

“What worries you most about coming to school?”

“What positive things happen in school that help you to feel safe?”

“What do you think would happen if you reported a concern about sexualised behaviour or abuse?”

What to do if you have concerns

Open a door to communication

If you have concerns that a child may be being sexually abused, you can open a door to communication with them. Telling them that you have noticed something about them can be useful in demonstrating that you are thinking about them and holding them in mind:

“I have noticed you don’t seem yourself at the moment.”

“I have noticed you crying.”

“I notice you are very quiet at the moment.”

The child may not respond to you at this point, and you should not expect a response. However, you may want to try opening up a conversation by saying things like:

“Help me understand more about that.”

“Can you tell me more about that?”

“I have noticed X and I wonder what might be going on for you at the moment.”

“I have noticed X and would like to understand more about that.”

Be aware of your body language

Try to sit at the same level as the child and adopt a relaxed and attentive pose. Much of your communication takes place through your body language, so it is important to ensure that your body communicates the same messages as your words: that you have time for the child, and that you are comfortable.

Be attuned to the child’s needs

Give the child time – they may need a few seconds, or even minutes, to process questions. This is particularly true for young children, those with learning difficulties, and those whose first language is not the language you are speaking. Children may be very fluent in English as a second language in most contexts, but talking about difficult subjects may be easier in their first language.

Use non-committal sounds such as *“Mmm”* or *“Uh-huh”* to show that you are listening and to encourage the child to continue, without offering a judgement.


Remember that, for some children, you will need to adapt your communication style to include other approaches – such as the use of symbol boards or other communication aids – beyond speaking to them. Ensure that the child has access to communication aids that can reflect experiences of sexual abuse (by including symbols for words that describe abuse, for example).

It is especially important to be clear in your language when talking to children who have special education needs. Avoid using figurative language, rhetorical questions, idioms or exaggeration, as autistic people can take these literally. If you do use them, explain what you have said and be clear about what you really mean. You may find it useful to:

- use the child’s name when you want to speak to them
- speak slowly, and limit the number of words you use
- pause between words and phrases – this gives the child time to process what you’ve said, and gives them an opportunity to think of a response
- rely less on non-verbal communication (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body language)
- use visual supports such as symbols, timetables and Social Stories, if appropriate
- be aware of the environment that you are in – for example, is it noisy or crowded? Sensory differences may affect how much information a child can process.

What to do if the child tells you something

If the child tells you something which indicates that they have been sexually abused, there are a few things that will be helpful to think about.

- **Receive the information calmly** – do not show shock, surprise or disbelief.
- **Accept and validate** what the child says – for example, by saying, “I hear what you are telling me.”
- **Find out what the child’s wishes are**, and let them know your next steps. You will have to navigate the fine line between respecting the child’s confidentiality and meeting your safeguarding responsibilities. You need to remain open, honest and transparent about the actions you will need to take, and be clear about what information you are going to share with whom. This will be in your school policy.
- Let the child know that they can **keep talking to you** whenever you are available, and let them know who else they can talk to at times when you are not.
- **Make a record**. It is important that you record, as soon as possible, what the child has said **in their own words**; do not try to interpret their words. It is also useful to make a note of how the child presented, the non-verbal communication they used, and their body language.
- You should always **alert your safeguarding lead** and follow your school’s policies and procedures. Do not manage this process alone – ensure you are supported by your safeguarding colleagues.
- **Talk to the child’s parent(s)**, provided it has been decided with your safeguarding lead that the child will be safe if you do so. Our resource **[Communicating with Parents and Carers: A Guide for Education Professionals When There Are Concerns about Sexual Abuse or Behaviour](#)**  is designed to help you with this.

[Keeping Children Safe in Education 2022](#)  states:

96. Where there is a safeguarding concern, governing bodies, proprietors and school or college leaders should ensure the child’s wishes and feelings are taken into account when determining what action to take and what services to provide.

97. Systems should be in place, and they should be well promoted, easily understood and easily accessible for children to confidently report any form of abuse or neglect, knowing their concerns will be treated seriously, and knowing they can safely express their views and give feedback.




3


Ongoing support for and communication with children in school

Whatever happens going forward, children will require continued support in school to ensure they are safe and can access ongoing support.

Developing a safety plan

It is worth considering the following to plan the most effective approach for the child.

- Have you taken all immediate action to safeguard the child? For example:
- Do immediate referrals to the police or children's social care need to be made?
- Do any immediate changes need to be made in school, such as moving the child to a different class or increasing supervision in a particular area?
- Is the child being given access to therapeutic interventions?
- Have you considered the child's needs and wishes?
- Have you consulted all relevant guidance? (e.g. [*Keeping Children Safe in Education 2022*](#)  or [*Keeping Learners Safe 2022*](#) )
- Have you informed the relevant/appropriate staff? Not everyone should know; it may be best for this to be discussed by a safeguarding lead and the class teacher or form tutor.
- Have you recorded everything appropriately?
- In most cases it will be necessary to be in contact with the child's parent(s) – is there an agreed plan for this? For more information, see our resource [*Communicating with Parents and Carers: A Guide for Education Professionals When There Are Concerns about Sexual Abuse or Behaviour*](#) .
- If it is a case of harmful sexual behaviour, has the child who has harmed been given clear messages that their behaviour is not acceptable? (See [Chapter 4](#).)
- Is there anyone who should not have contact with the child (such as the family of the person the child says has harmed them)?

Some schools put together a **safety plan** to ensure that there is a consistent approach, and that all staff are aware of it. To underpin the safety plan, it is important to undertake a risk assessment. In cases involving harmful sexual behaviour, specific measures may be needed to protect other students. When putting together a safety plan, you should always consult your school's policy and procedures, and ensure that you are in contact with local agencies which can provide ongoing support. Our guide to [*Safety Planning in Education*](#)  contains more information.

Determining the level of support required

The level of support required by the child will depend on their situation. For example, they may:

- need support in deciding which of their peers (if any) to talk to, what to tell them, and when

- need a safe adult to whom they can go if they are feeling upset
- need reassurance that the only staff members aware of the child's situation are those who *need* to be aware of it – you may have to tell the child which staff members these are
- need help identifying potential trigger points (such as an upcoming lesson on relationships and sex) – you should consider the material to be covered in the child's lessons, and discuss this with them in advance
- find it helpful (depending on their age) to have a 'calm box' – for example, items they can keep in their pocket and take out for comfort
- want to know that they can phone home if they are feeling anxious or upset – you will need to talk to their (non-abusing) parents about how this can be facilitated.

It's also important for you to let the child know you are there for them, if they want to talk.

The child's concentration span may be affected, and they may become fidgety – so tasks should be 'chunked' and frequent breaks built in, with gentle reminders used to encourage the child to refocus if they drift off and appear to be daydreaming.

It may also be helpful to give the child a sign (e.g. a card they can discreetly show a teacher) to signal that they need to take some time out or find a 'safe' person or place. In the longer term, try to become aware of behaviours, which may be subtle, indicating that the child is distressed or needs support.

School staff should be mindful of the child's need for privacy (for example, by not reminding them that they have an appointment if other students may overhear).

Additional support may be needed in less structured times of the day: instead of finding their own things to do at breaks and lunch times, the child may benefit from being directed to more structured activities or being allocated a buddy.

It is important to recognise that any problematic behaviour displayed by the child may result from the abuse, and that additional support will be needed for this. Avoid responding to problematic behaviour using disciplinary measures alone. For example, the child should not be given extra work to catch up on, nor be kept back at lunch break or playtimes to recover lost learning. It should also be recognised that the trauma of sexual abuse can affect a child's working memory, and previously embedded learning may be significantly compromised. You should develop a learning recovery plan to support the child.

If the child's problematic behaviour becomes unacceptable in the school environment, it is important that a trusted adult explains to them why it is unacceptable; that adult needs to be clear and factual in what they say.

Some children may overachieve as a response to being sexually abused. In that case, staff should be careful to ensure that they receive no less support than children whose behaviour is considered more challenging.

Parents will appreciate being kept in touch with how their child is coping at school, and being given positive news (e.g. if the child participated well in a music lesson), as well as being told when the child was distressed and how this was managed.

Section B6 of our guide to [***Safety Planning in Education***](#)  details more strategies that you might find helpful in supporting the child(ren).

If a police investigation into the sexual abuse of the child is ongoing

You may worry about how much you should say to the child, or what you can or can't say, while a police investigation is ongoing. With regard to the sexual abuse itself:

- If the child chooses to talk to you about aspects of the abuse that they have already reported, you should let them speak, record what they say and pass the record on to the investigating police officer – but do not ask them questions about what they tell you, or comment on it.
- If the child is talking to you about any aspect of the abuse that they have not already reported, you can talk to them about it, following the advice in [Chapter 2](#).

If you're unsure whether the child is telling you information that they have not previously reported, try to ask them whether they have already told it to someone else.

It's important to let the child know that you know about the ongoing investigation. And there are lots of things you definitely can and should talk to them about, such as asking them:

“How are you?”

“How are you feeling?”

“How are you sleeping?”

“How are you eating?”

“Is there anything I can do to help make you more comfortable in school?”

“Is there anything you need?”

“Would you like to talk to someone about how you are feeling?”

The child may need additional support and adjustments to help them continue with their education while the investigation is ongoing. They may find it a challenge to engage in their schoolwork, or they may appear more focused on their work as they attempt to divert their attention onto something other than the investigation. In either case, you should continue offering them support as outlined earlier in this chapter, and review whether the support you offer should be varied.

If a police investigation has not been pursued or has not resulted in a conviction

Unfortunately, most criminal investigations into child sexual abuse do not progress to a prosecution or conviction, or even a clear recognition that the child was abused. This **does not** mean that the abuse hasn't taken place.

Under these circumstances, the child may feel that they haven't been believed, and may doubt that the adults around them can be trusted to keep them safe. They will need to be reassured that the lack of an investigation, prosecution or conviction is not their fault – for example, by being told:

“The result does not mean we don't think the abuse happened.”


“It is not your fault this outcome happened – you did everything you could.”

“We will continue to support you in school.”

Even if an investigation hasn't been pursued or hasn't resulted in a conviction, it is still important to provide the child with support in school and to consider how this can best be done, as outlined earlier in this chapter.

When a child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour

Harmful sexual behaviour, as defined in the **Introduction**, may be displayed towards younger children, peers, older children or adults. It is harmful to the child who displays it, as well as the people it is directed towards.

Some sexual behaviour by children is considered developmentally normal, but sexual behaviour between children whose ages differ by more than two years should be considered harmful – especially if one child is pre-pubescent and the other is not. However, a younger child can still harm an older child. The **Parents Protect**  website contains guidance on what constitutes developmentally expected sexual behaviour at different ages and stages of childhood, and information about the Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool for professionals.

Harmful sexual behaviour is characterised by a range of behaviours that can include:

- sexual name-calling
- sexual harassment
- online sexual bullying
- sexual image sharing
- sexual assault
- rape.

It is essential that all staff understand the importance of addressing any problematic or harmful sexual behaviour in the school environment. Your approach to this will depend to some extent on the age of the child(ren), the nature of the behaviour and the situation. Many school behaviour policies include examples of inappropriate and harmful behaviours with guidance on how these should be responded to. It is helpful to refer to this when speaking with children about any problematic or harmful sexual behaviour.

Addressing harmful sexual behaviour in primary schools

- 1. Stop the behaviour.** Change the situation, stop, distract, or change the environment. Separate the children, draw their attention to something else, tell them to stop what they are doing.
- 2. Define the behaviour.** Be clear about what the child is doing that is inappropriate. Describe what you see to the child. The more specific and clear you can be about what they are doing wrong, the better the opportunity they will have to change or relearn their behaviour.
- 3. State the rules.** Tell the child how you expect them to behave, or repeat rules you have previously told them – for example:

“The rule is...”

“We expect everyone to respect each other’s privacy, and that includes not touching each other on the genitals...”

Be direct but don’t lecture.

- 4. Enforce the rules.** For younger children, you can redirect or distract the child to more appropriate behaviour. End the encounter on a positive note and praise the child when they act in the way you suggest.

Addressing harmful sexual behaviour in secondary schools

- Be clear about what you have seen, heard or been told about, e.g.
“Sameera has told me that you pushed her against the wall in the toilet and touched her breasts under her clothes.”
- Be clear that this behaviour is not OK, and explain why it is not OK, e.g.
“This behaviour is not acceptable, and sexually touching anyone without their consent is sexual assault.”
- Be clear that harmful sexual behaviours may have consequences, e.g.
“Sexual assault is a criminal offence and may be reported to the police.”
- Give the child the opportunity to talk to you about their behaviour, e.g.
“Can you help me to understand what happened?”
- Open a door for them to talk to you about anything that may be worrying them, e.g.
“I am here if there is anything you would like to talk to me about.”
- Clearly explain your next steps, e.g.
“I will need to speak to your parents about this. Is there anything you would like me to know before I do that?”

Thinking about the child's safety

When a child displays problematic or harmful sexual behaviour, you will need to think about the reasons behind this – including by considering whether the child has been or is being sexually abused.

You may want to ask them questions such as:

“I’ve noticed you doing X. Some people have different words for this – I wonder what you call it?”

“I’ve noticed you doing X. I am interested in whether you have seen this somewhere?”

“I noticed you doing X. Do you want to tell me about that?”

“I have noticed you doing X. I am interested to know if you have heard about this anywhere?”








“I have been told you [describe specific reported behaviour]; this is not OK. Can you help me understand what happened?”



Further information and support for children and those around them

Organisations providing information and support

In addition to the organisations below, you will also be able to access support from local statutory agencies.

Organisation	Details
<u>Parents Protect</u> 	Information and resources for parents concerned about child sexual abuse.
<u>Stop It Now!</u> 	Information and a confidential helpline, live chat and secure messaging service for anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse prevention.
<u>The Upstream Project</u> 	Online resources for adults (including parents and professionals) concerned about child sexual abuse; includes information about preventing abuse, particularly in relation to noticing the signs of abusive behaviour.
<u>Family Rights Group</u> 	Advice for parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends of children who are in need, at risk or in the care system in England and Wales, explaining their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about these children's welfare.
<u>Marie Collins Foundation</u> 	Support for children and young people who experience sexual abuse facilitated by the internet, and their families.
<u>NSPCC</u> 	Charity specialising in child protection and dedicated to protecting children from abuse.
<u>Equally Safe at School</u> 	Tools and resources developed to help secondary schools take a whole-school approach to preventing gender-based violence; some of the resources are also relevant to young people and their parents.

Resources available online

We consider the resources below to provide particularly helpful information.

Title	Produced by	What is this?
<u>Still We Rise: A Guide for Parents and Carers Supporting Young Women around the Issue of Gender-based Violence</u>	Women & Girls Network (2020)	A guide to identifying the signs of gender-based violence, understanding the trauma it causes, supporting girls and young women to talk about difficult things, accessing support (e.g. through school or children's services) and staying safe online.
<u>What's the Problem? A Guide for Parents of Children and Young People Who Have Got into Trouble Online</u>	Lucy Faithfull Foundation (2017)	A guide for parents when something happens in their child's online life (e.g. the child has sent a naked picture of themselves to someone else or posted it online, and is struggling with the consequences).
<u>Living and Coping with Child Exploitation</u>	PACE	Webpages for parents covering topics such as the role of children's social care services and the process involved after a referral has been made; working with the police and understanding current legislation; living and coping with child exploitation; understanding online risks; and supporting the child in court.
<u>How Can I Help Someone Else Seek Help</u> <u>and How Do I Support My Friend?</u>	Mind	Advice for the family and friends of young people experiencing mental health problems.
<u>Helping a Friend</u>	Childline	Advice for young people.
<u>Going to Court</u>	Victim Support	Advice for young people.



Looking after your own needs

The impact on you

School staff who support sexually abused children may be involved in helping them and their families live with the secondary physical, psychological and social consequences.

It is therefore critical that you understand the psychological and emotional impact on yourself of working with children who have been sexually abused, if you are to stay healthy and effective in your role. Maintaining your energy levels, and your feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, is essential to ensure that you can support children effectively and preserve your own emotional wellbeing.

Supporting children who have been sexually abused can be emotionally draining and can trigger responses, particularly if you have your own experiences and history of sexual abuse. The effects can include:

- feeling overprotective towards children in your life
- having trouble sleeping
- feeling angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- finding it difficult to empathise.

Vicarious trauma

If you don't look after yourself when working with distressing and disturbing material, your own wellbeing may deteriorate, leading in some situations to vicarious (or secondary) trauma. This is the trauma you may experience when you are exposed to a traumatic event such as supporting a child who has been sexually abused.

There are three important things to know about vicarious trauma:

- It manifests differently in each individual.
- It can occur as a result of exposure to one case, or may be cumulative (with the effect intensifying over time and with multiple clients).
- It is pervasive, affecting all areas of your life including your emotions, relationships and view of the world.

While you may be unlikely to experience vicarious trauma, you may experience 'burnout'. This is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion, and can develop if a person has been under stress for a prolonged period. They feel powerless, and may think that there is nothing they can do about their situation or that there is no point.

Acknowledging that working with sexually abused children can affect your health and wellbeing is the most important first step in preventing it from occurring.

The ***Vicarious Trauma & Self-care Toolkit***  produced by the Toronto Youth Equity Strategy provides useful information about preventing vicarious trauma.

How can you look after your wellbeing?

To look after yourself when working with children who have been sexually abused, make time to switch off and relax by:

- going for a walk or doing other physical exercise
- talking to a friend
- going to the gym
- taking a long bath
- cooking a nice meal
- listening to music.

You may also find it useful to access therapy or counselling.

At work, it's important to:

- seek support with the issues and challenges you are facing
- avoid taking on additional pressures or responsibilities.

Your school may be able to provide you with some support, perhaps through supervision or support from peers. Some schools have employee welfare schemes that can provide access to counselling.

You can find information for professionals working with abuse on the Upstream Project's [Looking after yourself](#) webpage. You can also get help and support from the mental health charity [Mind](#).

If you are personally affected, you can:

- find help, support and advice in your area through the [Survivors Trust directory of services](#)
- call the [Rape Crisis](#) helpline on 0808 802 9999, which can also tell you where your nearest services are located if you would like face-to-face support or counselling
- call the [National Association for People Abused in Childhood](#) on 0808 801 0331
- find online help for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape from [Survivors UK](#).

Resources to help you in your work

You may also find it helpful to read around the subject of child sexual abuse in more detail. The following resources provide particularly useful information, and include resources produced outside the UK which we consider relevant.

Title	Produced by	What is this?
<u><i>Child Development and Trauma Guide</i></u> ↗	Government of Western Australia (2010)	A guide to the needs of children at different ages, and their parents and carers, when trauma has occurred.
<u><i>Children and Young People Presenting with Harmful Sexual Behaviours: a Toolkit for Professionals</i></u> ↗	The Children's Society (2018)	Guidance for those working with children who have sexually harmed.
<u><i>Information Guide for Professionals</i></u> ↗	Somerset Phoenix Project	A guide to working with children and families affected by child sexual abuse.

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