

Centre of  
expertise  
on child  
sexual abuse

# Communicating with parents and carers

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](http://www.csacentre.org.uk) 

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# Introduction

## What is this guide about?

This guide has been developed to help safeguarding teams and wider education staff talk to and provide a supportive response to parents when concerns about sexual abuse have been raised, or when such abuse has been identified.

It covers situations where their child has been sexually abused by an adult or adults, or has experienced harmful sexual behaviour displayed by another child or children; this abuse or behaviour may have taken place within or outside the school environment. It also offers advice on communicating with and supporting parents whose child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour.

The guide aims to help you understand more about how child sexual abuse affects parents and their children, so you can support them effectively. It explores the impact of child sexual abuse carried out in different contexts, and how such abuse can affect families differently. It explains why parents need to receive a supportive response from their child's school/college, and what this involves. And it provides details of resources and sources of support which may be helpful to you and the parents you work with.

The 2022 edition of ***Keeping Children Safe in Education*** [↗](#), the Department for Education's statutory guidance for England, incorporates advice on 'sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges' which had previously been published separately. The guidance now specifically states how schools should work with parents and carers, and with other children (see **Appendix 1**).

The 2022 edition of the Welsh Government's statutory guidance, ***Keeping Learners Safe*** [↗](#), is supported by further practice guidance which includes ***All Wales Practice Guidance – Safeguarding Children Where There Are Concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour*** [↗](#); this includes information about how to understand what constitutes harmful sexual behaviour in children, including online harmful sexual behaviour.

This guide seeks to support education professionals in implementing the DfE and Welsh Government statutory guidance while also taking account of parents' wider need for support. It has been adapted from our publication *Supporting Parents and Carers: A Guide for Those Working with Families Affected by Child Sexual Abuse*. We have also produced two other resources for schools which you may find helpful:

- ***Communicating with Children: 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. Additionally, we would like to thank Joe Dove from SWIFT, East Sussex Children's Services, for allowing us to use content he developed locally.

Please note that this guide relates to your contact/relationship with parents where they have reported child sexual abuse or where you have identified concerns that need sharing with parents. **It does not cover safeguarding actions when you have concerns that a child is being, or has been, sexually abused.**

If you have concerns that a child in your school is being sexually abused, you should:

- consider any immediate steps needed to protect them from the person or people who may be abusing or have abused them
- make a referral to children's social care or contact the police where appropriate.

## Definitions and language used in this guide

This guide is about working with 'non-abusing' parents and carers. By this we mean parents and carers – including biological parents, step-parents, adoptive parents, foster carers and other relatives who may be the child's main care-giver, such as grandparents – who have not been involved in the sexual abuse of their child, although they may previously have come to agencies' attention for other reasons. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to this group as '**parents**' and will specify otherwise when we mean anything different. We use the term **co-parent** when referring to a parent who is separated or divorced from the other parent.


For the same reason, 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 '**school**' to refer to a child's place of learning, whether a school or a college.

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 (in relation to adults) about **the person who has sexually abused the child**, either online or through contact abuse.
- Instead of 'peer-perpetrated abuse' or 'peer-on-peer abuse', we talk about **harmful sexual behaviour displayed by another child**.
- Instead of 'disclosing abuse', we refer to **telling someone or reporting abuse**.

### 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.

# Why parents need support

## When their child has been sexually abused

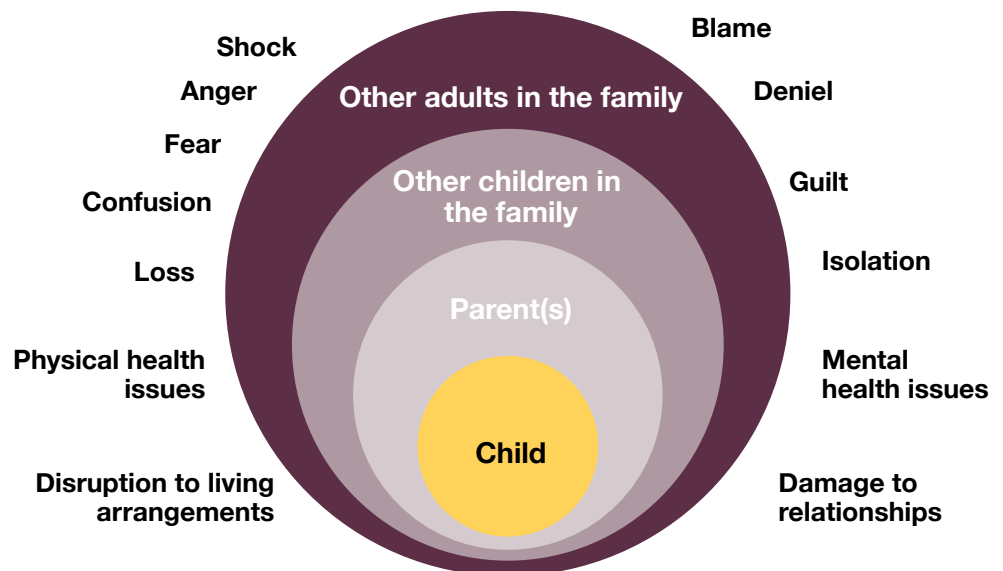
Discovering that their child may have been sexually abused is one of the most devastating events a parent can experience.

Parents in this situation are likely to be overwhelmed by shock, anger, confusion and disbelief, and may find it particularly difficult to come to terms with what has happened if the abuse was carried out by their partner or another member of their family.

If they have existing vulnerabilities (resulting from domestic abuse, disabilities, mental ill health or substance misuse, for example), their health and wellbeing may suffer further.

Their relationships with the abused child, their other children, their wider family and their friends may all be affected.

The impact of learning about the abuse can be immense and complex, both in the short term and in the longer term.



Being supportive to parents in this situation is vital because it can help them to:

- support their child in turn, mitigating the impact of the abuse on the child
- encourage and help their child to engage with professionals and access services
- protect their child from further abuse.

**Parents need support so they can protect and support their child.**



## When their child has sexually harmed someone else

Parents who discover that their child has sexually harmed someone else may experience feelings of:

- failure
- shock and denial
- guilt, shame and blame
- isolation and stigma
- loss and grief
- confusion/uncertainty about sex and relationships
- being overwhelmed
- being out of control and powerless, particularly once professionals become involved.

By asking the parent(s) how they are feeling and acknowledging how difficult the situation must be for them, you can help them to manage these feelings and feel supported. If you take a non-judgemental approach to their child, this will help reduce any guilt and shame they may be feeling, and talking through what needs to happen will help them feel involved in managing the situation.



# 2

## Communicating with parents whose child has been sexually abused

When it is discovered or suspected that a child has been sexually abused, it is important for the parent(s) to know how the school plans to support the child.

Some of this support will depend upon the context of the abuse (e.g. whether it has happened inside or outside school), and the latter part of this chapter contains guidance on support relevant to these different contexts – but there are some general actions that schools can take to support the parent(s) of any child who has or may have been sexually abused.

Education professionals sometimes struggle to make sense of concerns about child sexual abuse, particularly if they have previously viewed the person suspected of harming the child (whether this is another child or an adult) in a positive light. It is important to put aside any previous interactions you have had, and to act supportively towards the child's (non-abusing) parents at this point – not just to meet their own needs, but also to help them protect and support their child (and any other children in the family) while coming to terms with the abuse.

The parent(s) may appreciate knowing that the school has put some supportive strategies in place, which may include:

- allowing the child to use a discreet signal or sign (e.g. a card) so they can indicate to a teacher that they need time out or need to go to a safe person or place
- allowing the child to ring home if they are feeling anxious or upset
- being mindful of the child's need for privacy – for example, school staff won't remind the child about an appointment if other students can overhear.


The parent(s) may also appreciate knowing that they can support their child by:

- helping the child decide which peers (if any) to talk to, what to tell them, and when
- reminding them which school staff know about their situation, and which ones they can approach if they want to talk to someone or are feeling upset
- making them a 'calm box' (e.g. items they can keep in their pocket and take out for comfort)
- reviewing their timetable to identify lessons or less structured times during the week which may be difficult for them.

Both school staff and the parent(s) will need to be aware of the potential impacts of the abuse on the child's emotions and behaviour:


- The child's concentration span may be affected – they may need to have tasks or homework split up into chunks, with regular breaks and help to refocus if they 'drift off' and appear to be daydreaming.
- The child may overachieve as a response to the abuse. If this happens, school staff should be careful to ensure that the child does not receive less support than those whose behaviour is considered more challenging.
- The child may need extra support during less structured times of the day, such as being directed to more structured activities or being allocated a buddy.
- If the child has been abused through social media platforms, they may need their parent(s) to make it clear that they were not to blame for the abuse. The child's relationships with their peers are likely to suffer, as may their parents' relationships with the parents of any children involved in the abuse.

It is important for school staff to recognise that any problematic behaviour by the child may be a response to the abuse, and to support the child through the school's pastoral systems rather than going down a disciplinary route: for example, disciplinary measures should not be placed on children whose attainment or attendance levels decrease. It should also be recognised that the trauma of the abuse can damage a child's working memory, and previously embedded learning may be significantly compromised.

You can find more information, including helpful strategies, in section B6 of our [\*\*\*Safety Planning in Education\*\*\*](#)  guide.

## Sexual abuse in school

The parent(s) of a child who has been sexually abused in school are likely to be worried about their child returning to school. Whether you are having to tell the parent(s) what has happened, or they have told you about it, there are a number of things that you need to do when speaking to them:

- **Recognise and acknowledge the distress they are likely to be feeling – this may well present as anger.**
- **Be clear about what has happened.** It is important to be specific, including information about where and when the abuse happened.
- **Use language which does not minimise the child's experience.** Keep any descriptions factual while acknowledging how the child may be feeling.
- **Let the parent(s) know exactly what you have done to ensure their child is safe** – they will rightly want reassurance that the child's safety is being prioritised. Let them know how and when the action you are taking will be reviewed.
- **Let parents know who will find out more about what has happened.** When children aged 10 and over have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, the police may become involved in investigating what has happened.
- **Discuss the support that their child can access in school.** This may include amending their timetable or allowing them to leave a classroom without being questioned, for example. See the beginning of this chapter for further suggestions, alongside section B6 of our [\*\*\*Safety Planning in Education\*\*\*](#)  guide.
- **Be clear about the outcomes** – give clear, specific information about what will happen next, including letting the parents know what your own school protocol says.

## Sexual abuse outside the school environment

Many parents appreciate having someone outside the family to turn to for guidance and support after sexual abuse of their child has been identified or suspected. Your school can provide valuable support and guidance. If you take a supportive approach with parents, it can help them feel more able to support their child and to ask for your help when they need it.

It's essential that you **don't**:

- assume that the parents knew about the abuse
- give them the impression that you think they failed to protect their child
- focus on 'explaining' the abuse at the expense of providing information and support.

The school can provide the parents with a safe space, away from their child, to process what they have learnt and to work through some of the shock, guilt and/or anger they may feel. They may need information and support to access services in the community which can help them and their child.

Note that parents will be additionally vulnerable if they are experiencing domestic abuse and/or have been sexually abused themselves. They may also be subject to ongoing threats and violence from the person(s) who have abused their child. It is important to ask the parent(s) whether they have any fears or concerns about:

- what their partner/co-parent might think or do
- what other members of their family might think or do
- what members of their wider family/community might think or do.

**If they do have any fears or concerns, take action:**

- Identify who their concerns relate to and what they are concerned about.
- If their fears relate to forced marriage, 'honour'-based abuse or the risk of the child (and possibly the parent themselves) being sent abroad, seek advice from specialist organisations (see below) and initiate safeguarding procedures.
- Support them to identify how their fears or concerns may affect their relationship with their child.
- Help them to identify their network of support – among friends, family and the community.
- Work with them to ensure they are supported in addressing these concerns, and seek support from any organisations that can help them to engage fully with this process.

## Ongoing sexual abuse

In some situations, the sexual abuse of a child continues after it has been identified. This is common in cases where a child is being abused by a group, gang or network: the child cannot escape from the people abusing them, who may use threats of violence against other family members to keep the child in their control. In these situations, the child may go missing, miss school, stay out overnight, drink or take drugs, or be aggressive at school.

The child's parent(s) are likely to find this extremely challenging and draining. If their child is missing school frequently, they may also worry about what might happen to them if this continues. It is important to reassure them that no disciplinary action will be taken against them for their child's non-attendance, and that your priority is to support them and their child.

The parent(s) may appreciate it if you are able to keep in touch with them, to help them think about how they can carry on supporting their child. The organisation Parents against Child Exploitation (Pace) advises that the most important things are for parents not to give up; to keep telling their child that they love them; and to trust that, despite appearances, their support is making a difference to their child. It also suggests that parents should try to create opportunities to connect with their child, based on the child's interests (such as watching TV programmes together, cooking, going to the gym or having beauty treatments together), which provide opportunities to strengthen the parent/child relationship. If shared activities or verbal communication between parent(s) and child are challenging or lead to heightened conflict, or if the child has been relocated owing to the risks posed, actions which reiterate that the parent(s) care for the child – such as placing post-it notes or sending loving messages – are important.

Bear in mind that the stress of parenting in these circumstances may lead the parent(s) to neglect their own needs, welfare and self-care. Try to help them understand that looking after themselves will enable them to maintain the resilience that they will need to support their child during the abuse and afterwards.



# 3.

## Communicating with parents whose child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour

### Initial responses

It is shocking for parents to learn that their child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour, and they are likely to feel a range of emotions including anger, fear, guilt and devastation.

Some parents may struggle to believe what you are telling them – as it is so far removed from what they know of their child – or fail to accept the harm done. **Stay calm** and give them time to assimilate the **clear information** you provide; this may require more than one conversation, as they may struggle to hear anything you say after the shock of the initial information. **Reassure** them that you will work with them to ensure their child is safe and, where appropriate, will return to normal school routines as soon as possible – this will depend on the severity of the situation, and safety planning may be needed to support this process.

Being **non-judgemental** is crucial in providing a supportive response to parents, especially as they may feel they are to blame for their child's behaviour. Parents who have themselves experienced sexual abuse may have strong emotional reactions to hearing what their child has done, and may feel angry with their child.

It may help to adopt a 'teach me' attitude by asking the parent(s) questions such as "What do you need help with?" or "What are you most worried about at the moment?", to build a better understanding of their individual needs. Consider the following before talking to the parent(s):

- **Agree the terminology you will be using.** Families will use lots of different words when referring to sensitive body parts. Agree the terminology that you will be using during the meeting. This will help normalise your discussions and help promote a more comfortable conversation. For example, start with:

*"You may have taught your son/daughter some specific words for genitals, but will refer to the genitals by their correct terms, 'penis' or 'vagina'."*

- **Be clear about what has been alleged/observed.**

*"A girl in your son's class said that he grabbed her breasts over her school shirt when they were in the playground at break-time. She said he held his hand there for about five seconds despite her telling him to get off and attempting to get away."*

- **Explore the concerns together.**

*"I wonder if you have any concerns about him/her/them acting sexually? Perhaps you were unsure about it or didn't know who to speak to about it?"*

*"I appreciate that this may be hard for you to hear, and I wondered if you could think of any reason why they might have behaved in this way?"*

- **Be clear and factual in the information you share.** Tell the parents as much information as you think is appropriate without compromising the other child or children. Use clear language, accepting that talk of sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviour can be very difficult for the parent(s) to hear. Describe the facts and avoid being judgemental.
- **Explain what will happen next.** It is always important to focus on the behaviour of the child as the concern, rather than focusing on the child themselves. Using clear and non-blaming language will help avoid a defensive reaction from the parents. For example:

*“When there is an incident of harmful sexual behaviour between pupils/students, the school have a responsibility to assess the seriousness of the behaviour.”*

*“We have used an assessment tool to help us assess whether the alleged sexual behaviour is healthy, problematic or harmful.”*



- **Outline the possible outcomes.** These might range from an explanation that the child’s behaviour is not appropriate and that the school’s disciplinary procedures are necessary, through to a referral to children’s social care and/or the police.
- **Discuss how you plan to support the child.** This may involve making a referral to a specialist agency, allocating a mentor in school or working on education about healthy relationships and safe touch.
- **Discuss how you can support the parents.** This is likely to involve giving them a named key person and a contact number so they can have a direct link with someone who is familiar with all the details, as well as giving them information on where they can get support themselves. (See also [Chapter 5](#).)

## Providing ongoing support

Harmful sexual behaviour between children can feel scary and complex, and you may be managing very difficult situations. You may find the following advice helpful:

### Safety planning

Where a child has behaved in a sexually harmful way, safety planning is likely to be necessary.

- Involve the child in safety planning within the school environment, and use words that are familiar to them; the more meaningful the plan is to the child, the more they will be able to take ownership of it. Chapter 3 of our [Communicating with Children](#)  guide for education professionals contains more information.
- Involve the child’s parents too – the child needs to receive the same messages across all areas of their life. See our [Safety Planning in Education](#)  guide, and especially section B3. Remember, though, that the family may never have talked together about sex before and may not have the language to do so now; in this situation, you may need to think about how you develop a shared language.
- If the child’s harmful sexual behaviour took place in their home (e.g. sibling sexual abuse), it may be appropriate for someone from the school to be aware of safety planning in the home, as the school will have a role in sharing consistent messages across all areas of the child’s life.
- While some immediate measures will need to be considered (such as managing contact in school between the child and those they harmed), other elements of safety planning can take longer. Sometimes the process of engaging the child and their family in thinking about how to promote safety is as useful as the plan itself.
- Think about the context of the harmful behaviour that has taken place, so you can add any additional support and safety measures for the child and their fellow pupils. For example:
  - Where did the harmful behaviour take place? If it was in the school toilets, for example, what can you do to ensure that the child is not unsupervised during toilet breaks?
  - When did the harmful behaviour take place? If it was at lunch time, for example, what can you do to supervise the child more during lunch time?

- Are there any indications of what may have triggered the behaviour? (For example, the child being upset or angry.) How can school staff be alert to times when the behaviour may be more likely to take place? Younger children or those with disabilities may need more support, such as reminders during 'danger times', to manage their own behaviour.

### **Managing conflicts between parents**

When a child sexually harms another child/children, both/all sets of parents are likely to experience a range of emotions. Even though you should maintain confidentiality, you may find that children and parents share information, some of which may not be accurate. This can be particularly problematic at the school and within the community if more than two sets of parents are involved, e.g. when one or two children have sexually harmed groups of children.

- Invite both/all sets of parents into school, separately, to ensure that everyone has clear and accurate information about what has happened.
- Agree how you will share information moving forward. At this stage, consider whether any of the parents have had any difficulties understanding or remembering the information that you have already shared. Fear or confusion from lack of understanding may cause anger.
- Avoid using minimising or blaming language. It may take time to establish the facts of what has taken place, and it is important to maintain a non-judgemental stance in relation to any child involved, while acknowledging the feelings of all parents.
- Ask whether there is anything more that the parents feel you could be doing. If they think that action has not been taken, they may feel that they need to deal with it themselves. It is important to remind the parents what you have done and to be very clear about what you will do.
- Remember to share positive news with the parents, such as examples of positive behaviour that their child has displayed.
- Remind the parents about the importance of confidentiality, and reassure them that you will maintain this. Ask them to let you know if they or their child hear any misinformation or if they are concerned about rumours.
- In situations where the information has been shared more widely with parents in the community and there has been a community reaction to the information, seek advice from the local authority as soon as possible to prevent unwanted difficulties at the school gates or in the media.



# Communicating with parents in specific situations

## 4

You will be aware that some parents find communicating with you about their child harder than others, and talking about sexual abuse – whether their child has experienced such abuse or has displayed harmful sexual behaviour – is likely to make these challenges more pronounced.

In these situations, it is important to think about whether the parent(s) may face any challenges in supporting their child, and to consider what role you can play in helping them.

Be sensitive to parents' individual needs and circumstances, and avoid stereotyping. Try to understand more about their needs and how best you can help meet those needs by contacting specialist organisations for advice and information (see [Chapter 6](#)).

### Religious or cultural issues

Parents' faith and culture will affect their approach to parenting, and you should consider how to take this into account when helping them to support their child.

Parents from some cultures may be particularly worried that someone from their community (especially if it is a small and close-knit community) will find out about what has happened, because of a fear that this will bring shame and dishonour to the family. Such fears need to be identified and worked through, with support provided to the family; you may need advice or support from specialist organisations (see [Chapter 5](#)) to do this.

There may also be times when a parent's culture clashes with the cultural identity of their child: for example, a parent may practice a religion which the child has rejected, and the parent may then believe that this rejection has played a part in the child's experience of sexual abuse or sexually harmful behaviour. You may need to help the parent see that their child's needs at this time are more important than their own personal beliefs.

Parents from some cultures may find it particularly difficult to talk to their children about sexual matters, and this may mean that they struggle to accept that their children have behaved in a sexually harmful way (see [Chapter 3](#)).

### Language barriers

Establishing good communication is key to working effectively with parents whose first language is not English:

- As early as possible, establish what language they prefer to speak in, and arrange interpretation services accordingly. If they are reluctant to use interpreters, try to establish the reason for this; they may have concerns around confidentiality, especially if they are from a small and close-knit community (see 'Religious and cultural issues' above), and women may be uncomfortable speaking through a male interpreter. If there is a member of school staff who speaks the same language, and with whom the parent(s) feel comfortable, it may be possible for them to interpret.
- Always ask whether what you are saying has been understood. Remember that someone may say 'yes' to this and still not understand what is being said, because they don't want to look stupid or they fear negative consequences.

- Talk to the interpreter about the fact that some families may not have words for sexual abuse, meaning that they cannot provide a full picture.
- Do not allow family members (including the child), neighbours or friends to translate or speak on another person's behalf.
- Bear in mind that there are no words in some languages for 'sexual abuse', 'rape', 'sexual assault' etc. This may mean that the parent(s) cannot give you a full picture of their child's experiences; equally, if the child has been abused or harmed at school or in a school context (e.g. on a bus on the way to school), you will need to think about how you explain that to their parents. Talk to the interpreter about whether this is likely to be an issue, and how to address it.

Other tips for communicating informally with parents include:

- using technology – Google Translate isn't perfect, but it works fairly well
- using standard English – some parents may speak broken English, but they will be able to understand the gist of the message if you speak slowly and avoid slang, idioms and analogies
- asking the parent to say back to you what they think you have said, as this will show whether they have really understood what you were trying to tell them.

## Domestic abuse

If the parent is a victim of domestic abuse, supporting them to be safe from that abuse may also enhance their child's safety and wellbeing:

- Be very careful to ensure that in any communications with the parent and/or their child you do not compromise their safety (e.g. by leaving voice, email or text messages that contain sensitive information). When possible, try to talk to the parent on their own. You may need to be proactive in making this happen, as their abusive partner will often try to control all communications with them.
- Keep in mind whether the parent is at risk of being manipulated by the person who has abused their child, particularly if that person is also their abusive partner, and might be coerced into allowing them unsupervised contact with the child. If this is discovered, report your concerns to children's social care immediately.

## Learning disabilities/difficulties

Having a learning disability/difficulty doesn't prevent a parent from understanding that their child has been sexually abused or has sexually harmed others, but explanation may be more difficult and take longer. **Clear communication is key:**

- **Listen** to the parent and **take time** to understand how they communicate.
- Use ordinary words, avoid ambiguity and jargon, and **check their understanding.**
- Break information down into **manageable chunks**, and break complex tasks down into simpler parts.
- **Give the parent a note** of any advice or the details of the next meeting; even if they can't read, they can ask someone they trust to read it for them.
- **Use large text** – write everything in at least 16-point type and use 'sans serif' fonts.
-

# Helping parents access further support



## Organisations supporting parents

When child sexual abuse is identified or suspected, it can have wide-ranging impacts on the child and their family (see **Chapter 1**): as well as affecting their health, their relationships and the child's education, it can be hugely disruptive to the family's day-to-day life and even their living arrangements, **Citizens Advice** [↗](#) can provide information and support on a whole range of practical issues.

### Support specifically for parents affected by child sexual abuse











There are a wide range of organisations providing practical and emotional support to parents and other family members in this situation:

Name	Remit	Details
<b>Acts Fast</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	National	Provides ongoing emotional and practical support to parents and family members of children affected by sexual abuse.
<b>Barnardo's</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	<b>Services in locations nationwide</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	Provides support for parents in some areas, e.g. through the <b>Somerset Phoenix Project</b> <a href="#">↗</a> .
<b>Family Action: Post Sexual Abuse Service</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	Leicestershire	Provides therapeutic support for under-18s who have experienced sexual abuse; this includes group work for parents to help them support their child and manage their own needs.
<b>Family Rights Group</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	National	Works with parents and other family members whose children are in need, at risk or in the care system. Advises on rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about children's welfare. Also runs the <b>Young Parents Advice</b> <a href="#">↗</a> website.
<b>Lucy Faithfull Foundation</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	National	Provides information and advice for partners, parents, relatives and friends of people suspected or known to be accessing sexual images of children or engaging in other sexual behaviour involving children. Runs the <b>Stop It Now!</b> <a href="#">↗</a> helpline.
<b>Marie Collins Foundation</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	National	Provides support for parents, families and children abused online.
<b>We Stand</b> <a href="#">↗</a> (formerly Mosac)	National	Provides practical and emotional support to non-abusing parents and families of sexually abused children, including through a confidential helpline.
<b>NSPCC: Letting the Future In</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	Various locations nationwide	Offers joint sessions with sexually abused children and their parents and siblings, where safe and appropriate.
<b>Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace)</b> <a href="#">↗</a>	National	Provides support for parents of children who are, or are at risk of, being exploited by individuals outside the family.

Name	Remit	Details
<a href="#"><u>Safer London</u></a> 	London	Provides support to parents of children who have experienced or are at risk of sexual violence or exploitation.
<a href="#"><u>Safeline</u></a> 	Warwickshire	Offers services for the families of sexually abused children, including counselling, practical and emotional support, advocacy, advice and information (including on navigating the criminal justice system), and training.

### Organisations supporting women and girls from minority ethnic groups

Name	Remit	Details
<a href="#"><u>African Women's Voices</u></a> 	North East	Supports African women affected by gender-based violence in Sunderland.
<a href="#"><u>Angelou Centre</u></a> 	North East	Provides holistic services for Black and minoritised women and children across the North East.
<a href="#"><u>Apna Ghar Women's Centre</u></a> 	North East	Supports women from minority ethnic communities in South Tyneside.
<a href="#"><u>Apna Haq</u></a> 	Yorkshire	Supports women and girls from Black and minoritised communities, living in Rotherham, who are experiencing any form of violence.
<a href="#"><u>Asha Projects</u></a> 	London	Supports South Asian women and girls experiencing violence.
<a href="#"><u>Ashiana Network</u></a> 	London	Supports South Asian, Turkish and Middle Eastern women and girls experiencing domestic violence and sexual violence.
<a href="#"><u>AWRC</u></a> 	London	Provides services for women from minority ethnic backgrounds who are affected by domestic abuse, forced marriages, 'honour'-based and faith-based abuse.
<a href="#"><u>BAWSO</u></a> 	Wales	Provides advice, services and support to people from minority ethnic communities in Wales who are affected by abuse, violence and exploitation.
<a href="#"><u>Claudia Jones Organisation</u></a> 	London	Supports women and families of African Caribbean heritage.
<a href="#"><u>Halo Project</u></a> 	National	Supports victims of 'honour'-based violence, forced marriages and female genital mutilation from minority ethnic communities.
<a href="#"><u>Humraaz</u></a> 	North West	Supports Black and minoritised women in Lancashire who are affected by domestic abuse, sexual abuse and violence.
<a href="#"><u>IMECE Women's Centre</u></a> 	London	Provides guidance, information, advice and advocacy for Turkish, Kurdish, Turkish Cypriot and any other Turkish-speaking women.






Name	Remit	Details
<b><u>IKWRO</u></b> 	London	Provides support, advocacy and counselling for Middle Eastern and Afghan women and girls at risk of 'honour'-based violence, forced marriage, child marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence.
<b><u>Jewish Women's Aid</u></b> 	London	Supports Jewish women and children affected by domestic abuse and sexual violence.
<b><u>Karma Nirvana</u></b> 	National	Supports victims and survivors of 'honour'-based abuse, through services including a national helpline.
<b><u>Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organisation</u></b> 	London	Provides advocacy and support to women and girls from Kurdish, Middle Eastern and North African communities who are experiencing any form of violence.
<b><u>London Black Women's Project</u></b> 	London	Works to protect, promote and develop the rights and resources of women and children from visible minority ethnic communities.
<b><u>Latin American Women's Aid</u></b> 	National	Operates refuges for Latin American women and children fleeing gender-based violence, and supports women to recover from abuse and live empowered lives.
<b><u>Muslim Women's Network</u></b> 	National	Runs a helpline providing information, support, guidance and referrals for Muslim women and girls experiencing different forms of abuse.
<b><u>Panahghar</u></b> 	East/West Midlands	Provides multilingual support, advice, advocacy and access to safe refuge for victims of domestic abuse, sexual abuse or gendered abuse, and their families, from minority ethnic communities in Coventry and Leicester.
<b><u>PHOEBE Centre</u></b> 	East Anglia	Offers specialist advice, information, casework, advocacy and support and counselling services to minority ethnic women and children in Suffolk.
<b><u>Roshni</u></b> 	East/West Midlands	Supports minority ethnic communities affected by domestic abuse, forced marriage and 'honour'-based abuse in Birmingham.




## Resources for parents

### Resources available online






The following resources, including some produced outside the UK, provide particularly useful information for parents. Some of them cover similar ground, so we advise you to look through them and choose those that most seem most suited to the individual parents you are working with.

Title	Produced by	Details
<a href="#"><u><i>Family Safety: A Guide for Parents to Keep Children and Young People Safe from Sexual Abuse</i></u></a>	Parents Protect! (2016)	Advice on drawing up a family safety plan, including tips on internet safety.
<a href="#"><u><i>Information Guide for Parents and Carers</i></u></a>	Somerset Phoenix Project	Includes advice on understanding the behaviour and emotions of children who have been sexually abused, practical ideas to help them recover, and the effect on the victim's family and friends.
<a href="#"><u><i>Why My Child? A Guide for Parents of Children Who Have Been Sexually Abused</i></u></a>	Kidscape (2012)	A guide for parents covering topics such as dealing with the police, how parents can help their child and how parents can take care of themselves.
<a href="#"><u><i>Parent &amp; Carers Information Booklet</i></u></a>	Family Action (2017)	Includes information about the impact on the child of disclosing abuse, advice on supporting them, and an explanation of different professionals' roles.
<a href="#"><u><i>Still We Rise: A Guide for Parents and Carers Supporting Young Women around the Issue of Gender-based Violence</i></u></a>	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 social care) and staying safe online.
<a href="#"><u><i>Child Sexual Abuse Investigations: A Guide for Parents and Carers</i></u></a>	Stop It Now! (2021)	Practical information about what will happen if there is an investigation into the sexual abuse of a child. Also available <a href="#"><u>in Welsh</u></a> .
<a href="#"><u><i>Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: A Guide for Protective Parents/Guardians</i></u></a>	Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2018)	A booklet explaining what child sexual abuse is, how it happens, and its impact. Includes information about the role of technology and the internet.

Title	Produced by	Details
<p><u><a href="#">Child Sexual Abuse: Picking up the Pieces. A Guide for Parents/Guardians after Abuse Is Discovered</a></u> </p>	<p>Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2018)</p>	<p>A follow-up booklet addressing how parents may feel when abuse comes to light, and the emotions their child may be experiencing, with practical steps to support the child and get support for themselves. Topics include dealing with the child's feelings toward the offender, managing the child's day-to-day healing process, and added complexity when images of the abuse are shared online.</p>
<p><u><a href="#">Safeguarding Your Child: A Guide for Parents/Guardians Whose Child Was or May Have Been Sexually Abused</a></u> </p>	<p>Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2018)</p>	<p>Building on the above, this booklet covers issues that may present as an abused child gets older. Topics covered include personal boundaries, concerns around supervision, the child's digital presence, and appropriate sexual behaviour in children of different ages.</p>
<p><u><a href="#">Coping with the Shock of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse</a></u> </p>	<p>National Child Traumatic Stress Network, USA (2009)</p>	<p>Information for parents whose children have been abused by people connected to their family, including advice on coping with the parents' own reactions.</p>
<p><u><a href="#">Pace Information and Advice Centre</a></u> </p>	<p>Parents Against Child Exploitation</p>	<p>Webpages for parents in relation to child sexual exploitation, covering the role of children's social care and the processes involved after a referral has been made; working with the police and understanding current legislation; living and coping with child exploitation; understanding online risks; harassment by offenders; options if it is deemed unsafe for the child to stay at the family home; supporting the child in court; and how to complain about the response from police or other agencies.</p>
<p><u><a href="#">Sexual Abuse Online: How Can I Help My Child?</a></u> </p>	<p>Marie Collins Foundation/NWG (2017)</p>	<p>Information for parents about what online harm is, when to be worried, why children don't tell, how to respond, and where to get help.</p>

Title	Produced by	Details
<a href="#"><u>Sexual Abuse Online: Helping My Autistic Child</u></a> 	Marie Collins Foundation/Ann Craft Trust (2021)	A guide to the risks that autistic children may face online, and the ways being online can benefit them, with advice on how to respond if abuse happens.
<a href="#"><u>What's the Problem? A Guide for Parents of Children and Young People Who Have Got into Trouble Online</u></a> 	Lucy Faithfull Foundation (2017)	A guide to help parents cope when something happens in their child's online life (e.g. they have sent a naked picture of themselves to someone else or posted it online and are struggling with the consequences).
<a href="#"><u>Help Your Children Get the Most Out of the Internet</u></a> 	National Crime Agency – CEOP Education	Advice for parents on keeping children safe online and addressing concerns.

### Easy-read booklets for parents with learning difficulties/disabilities

Title	Produced by	Details
<a href="#"><u>What Happens if Children's Services Feel Your Child Is at Risk of Harm</u></a> 	VoiceAbility (2011)	Explains to parents when and how children's social care may get involved with their child.
<a href="#"><u>The Court and Your Child: When Social Workers Get Involved</u></a> 	CHANGE (2006)	Explains what happens when children's social care apply to a court for a care order or a supervision order.
<a href="#"><u>Meanings of Different Social Services Meetings</u></a> 	Person To Person Citizen Advocacy	Explains what happens at strategy meetings, child protection case conferences, core group meetings, Looked-After Child reviews and Child In Need reviews.
<a href="#"><u>When Children, Young People and Families Services Are Involved</u></a> 	Plymouth Parent Advocacy Project	Explains what will happen, what parents need to do, who can support them and who else will be involved when children's social care are worried about their child.
<a href="#"><u>Information for Adults Who Were Abused as Children</u></a> 	Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Weir NHS Foundation Trust (2018)	Information for adult survivors of child sexual abuse, explaining how they may feel and where they can get support.



## Books

Title	Author(s)/publisher	Details
<i>Caring for a Child Who Has Been Sexually Exploited</i>	Eileen Fursland/ BAAF (2017)	A book to help parents learn more about what child sexual exploitation involves (e.g. how victims are groomed); the response from agencies; how to support children through court; and ways to help children recover and keep them safe.
<i>Facing the Future – A Guide for Parents of Young People Who Have Sexually Abused</i>	Simon Hackett/ Russell House (2001)	Practical information and advice, stories of what has happened in other families, and therapeutic exercises giving parents an opportunity to consider their own responses to the issues raised.
<i>Reflective Journal for Parents and Carers: Supporting Your Child after Sexual Abuse</i>	Dr Jessica Taylor/ VictimFocus (2021)	Information, advice and reflective writing exercises to support parents and carers as they process their own thoughts, feelings and experiences.
<i>Strong Mothers A Resource for Mothers and Carers of Children Who Have Been Sexually Assaulted</i>	Anne Peake and Marion Fletcher/ Russell House (1997)	Explains what child sexual abuse is, why abused children don't tell their mothers, what will happen when a child tells, and how to help the child and prevent abuse from happening.



# 6

## Looking after your own needs

### Taking care of your wellbeing

Working with parents who are coping with the impact of child sexual abuse can be highly stressful and draining. It can also trigger a response if you have your own experiences and history of sexual abuse.

There may be times when you find that this work has an impact on your own health and wellbeing and, perhaps, on how you are thinking and acting.

Your school may be able provide you with some support, perhaps through supervision or support from peers. Some schools have employee welfare schemes providing 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 have personal experience of being sexually abused, you can:



- find help, support and advice in your area using the [Survivors Trust online map 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](#).

You may also find it helpful to contact organisations that support professionals in their work relating to child sexual abuse, and to read around the subject in more detail.

### Organisations providing support

Name	Remit	Details
<a href="#">Marie Collins Foundation</a>	National	Provides mentoring and practice supervision services designed for frontline workers and managers in children's social care, health services, education, criminal justice, Cafcass and the voluntary sector.
<a href="#">NWG Network</a>	National	A network of professionals working in the area of child sexual exploitation. It has resources to assist professionals working with parents affected by child sexual exploitation, and provides training to help professionals work with families as safeguarding partners.
<a href="#">Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace)</a>	National	Provides guidance and training to professionals on how child sexual exploitation, modern slavery, human trafficking and the criminalisation of exploited children affect the whole family.
<a href="#">Somerset Phoenix Project</a>	Somerset	Provides support, training, consultation and signposting to professionals supporting children and families affected by child sexual abuse.

## Resources to help you in your work

Title	Author(s)/publisher	Details
<p><b><u><a href="#">Supporting Parents and Carers of Children and Young People Affected by Sexual Exploitation: A Toolkit for Professionals</a></u></b> </p>	<p>The Children's Society (2018)</p>	<p>A guidance document covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the impact of child sexual exploitation on parents</li> <li>• professional responses to young people and their parents</li> <li>• barriers to parents accessing support</li> <li>• considerations around support for parents</li> <li>• practical tips for supporting parents.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Reflective Journal for Practitioners Working in Abuse and Trauma</i></p>	<p>Dr Jessica Eaton/ VictimFocus (2019)</p>	<p>A book for anyone working with children or adults who have been abused, traumatised or harmed. It aims to support reflection and critical thinking as well as covering wellbeing, vicarious trauma and self-development.</p>
<p><b><u><a href="#">Supporting Parents with a Learning Disability through the Child Protection System</a></u></b> </p>	<p>Mencap Cymru (2017)</p>	<p>A toolkit to help professionals and parents understand the key responsibilities of adult and children's social care in Wales, explaining how parents with a learning disability should be supported through the child protection process.</p>



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# Appendix 1: UK Government guidance

The September 2022 edition of the Department for Education's statutory guidance for England, ***Keeping Children Safe in Education*** [\[7\]](#), states in paragraphs 547–552 how schools should work with parents and carers following reports of sexual violence and sexual harassment in the school environment:

## Working with parents and carers

547. The school or college will, in most instances, engage with both the victim's and the alleged perpetrator's parents or carers when there has been a report of sexual violence (this might not be necessary or proportional in the case of sexual harassment and should be considered on a case-by-case basis). The exception to this rule is if there is a reason to believe informing a parent or carer will put a child at additional risk. Schools and colleges should carefully consider what information they provide to the respective parents or carers about the other child involved and when they do so. In some cases, children's social care and/or the police will have a very clear view and it will be important for the school or college to work with relevant agencies to ensure a consistent approach is taken to information sharing.

548. It is good practice for the school or college to meet the victim's parents or carers with the victim present to discuss what arrangements are being put in place to safeguard the victim and understand their wishes in terms of support they may need and how the report will be progressed.

549. It is also good practice for the school or college to meet with alleged perpetrator's parents or carers to discuss any arrangements that are being put into place that impact an alleged perpetrator, such as, for example, moving them out of classes with the victim and what this means for their education. The reason behind any decisions should be explained. Support for the alleged perpetrator should be discussed.

550. The designated safeguarding lead (or a deputy) would generally attend any such meetings. Consideration to the attendance of other agencies should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

551. Clear behaviour policies and child protection policies, especially policies that set out the principles of how reports of sexual violence will be managed and how victims and alleged perpetrators are likely to be supported, that parents and carers have access to, will, in some cases, help manage what are inevitably very difficult conversations.

552. Parents and carers may well struggle to cope with a report that their child has been the victim of a sexual assault or is alleged to have sexually assaulted another child. [...] Schools and colleges should consider signposting parents and carers to [...] support.

The Welsh Government's statutory guidance, *Keeping Learners Safe*, is supported by ***All Wales Practice Guidance – Safeguarding Children Where There Are Concerns about Harmful Sexual Behaviour*** [\[8\]](#), which includes the following information in relation to working with the parents and carers of the children involved:

Young people may be in denial about having a problem with their sexual behaviour and this may be supported by parents who do not want to confront the reality of their child behaving in this way. This is a common response to this issue, practitioners need to clearly explain the nature and purpose of the intervention so that parents understand what is being proposed. The offer of further work may be helpfully framed as an opportunity to understand how the young person came to be in a position where they behaved in a way considered to be abusive.

The support of parents and carers is extremely helpful in promoting engagement and successful outcomes. Parents need to be informed about the programme to the extent that they are aware that sexually explicit conversations will take place, also they may be asked to speak to their child about sexual issues. They may also be asked to model appropriate and respectful sexual attitudes and language.

[...]

Parents/Carers need clear information and advice about what will happen, about any interventions that will be provided to their child and about the things they can do to help protect their child and other children from further harm.

[...]

If any agency involved with the child has concerns that the child may have care and support needs that their parent(s)/carer(s) cannot meet without support, they should seek parental consent to refer the child to the home local authority Information, Advice and Assistance service for an assessment of their needs.





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