

# Training on intra-familial child sexual abuse for social work students – two approaches

Learning report

January 2022

## Executive summary

There is much evidence that key professionals working with children often lack knowledge, skills and confidence in identifying and responding to concerns of child sexual abuse. Social workers report receiving little or no input on this during their pre-qualifying training.

During the 2020/21 academic year, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) piloted two different approaches to the delivery of training on intra-familial child sexual abuse through the Social Work Teaching Partnership Programme:

- a one-day introductory course delivered directly to final-year social work students at undergraduate or Master's level at eight higher education institutions (HEIs) within one Teaching Partnership
- a three-day 'train the trainer' course designed to enable those HEIs' staff members to deliver the one-day introductory course themselves to social work students and social workers.

This learning report summarises findings from the CSA Centre's self-evaluation of the online delivery of both courses, based on feedback surveys completed by the participants.

The one-day introductory course was delivered eight times between October 2020 and April 2021, to a total of 418 students. Feedback was provided by 191 of these, with the overwhelming majority (95%) saying the course had increased their knowledge across different aspects of child sexual abuse – particularly in relation to the challenges around disclosure and the importance of adopting a holistic approach when supporting children and their families. Most also reported increased confidence in both identifying child sexual abuse and working with children and families.

The 'train the trainer' course was delivered over a three-week period in February 2021 to 19 HEI staff, nine of whom provided feedback. Most felt quite confident in their ability to deliver the one-day introductory course to students at the end of their training, although some indicated that they wanted to build their confidence further by revisiting the resources. The course materials were felt to be useful, and additional resources (such as a video recording of the one-day course being delivered) were suggested; these have been incorporated into the training package for future delivery.

The delivery of both courses was widely praised, with respondents finding the trainers to be knowledgeable and approachable. Some commented on the challenge of participating in training online, although others noted the value of participating from home, particularly given the sensitive nature of the training content.

Overall, both approaches were found effective, although it was clear that successful implementation of either approach depended on proactive input from the Teaching Partnership.

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse aims to root all its work in the best evidence available. For all our training courses and programmes, this starts with the development of the training, and we review the content regularly to ensure that it reflects the latest developments in research and practice. We routinely collect feedback from training participants, which is used for reflection and continuous improvement. When we pilot a new course, or offer it to a new group, we may undertake more follow-up data collection and publish a report. Our learning reports contain participant feedback; evaluation reports synthesise more types of evidence, such as interviews with participants' managers.

## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Background.....	4
The learning report.....	5
1. The one-day course for social work students.....	6
Developing the course .....	6
Course aims and learning outcomes.....	6
Participation and delivery .....	6
Evaluating the course .....	7
Feedback on the learning outcomes .....	7
Feedback on the course content and delivery.....	10
2. The ‘train the trainer’ course .....	12
Developing the course .....	12
Course aims and learning outcomes.....	12
Evaluating the course .....	12
Feedback on the learning outcomes .....	13
Feedback on the course content and delivery.....	14
Rolling out the one-day introductory course within the Teaching Partnership.....	15
Going forward.....	16

## Introduction

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) delivers training programmes aimed at improving professionals' knowledge, skills and confidence to identify and respond to concerns of child sexual abuse.

Recently, it has developed two approaches to delivering training for pre- and post-qualifying social workers in relation to intra-familial child sexual abuse: a one-day introductory course for social work students at higher education institutions, and a three-day 'train the trainer' course enabling members of a teaching partnership to deliver the one-day training to social workers and social work students.

## Background

Over the last few years, the CSA Centre has identified a number of issues in elements of social work practice:

- Key professionals working with children often lack knowledge, skills and confidence in identifying and responding to concerns of child sexual abuse.
- Social workers report receiving little or no input on child sexual abuse during pre-qualifying training.
- Multiple opportunities are missed for professionals to identify and respond to child sexual abuse – as a result many children's needs for safety and protection are not met. Fewer than one-eighth of sexually abused children come to the attention of professionals at the time this abuse is occurring.<sup>1</sup>
- Throughout the system, there has been an understandable yet disproportionate focus on child sexual exploitation to the detriment of other forms of child sexual abuse.

These issues have also been highlighted in joint targeted area inspections of the response to child sexual abuse in the family environment in England,<sup>2</sup> which found a marked lack of confidence among multi-agency professionals in dealing with such abuse. The inspectors concluded that:

- Intra-familial sexual abuse needs to be talked about, and is not a high enough priority for agencies
- in the absence of clear national and local strategies and approaches, professionals across all agencies lack the training and knowledge they need to identify and protect children
- professionals rely too heavily on children to verbally disclose sexual abuse
- when children have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, professionals often respond solely to this behaviour rather than considering the possible causes of it
- practice in this area is too police-led and not sufficiently child-centred, with health agencies too often not involved at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Karsna, K. and Kelly, L. (2021) [\*The scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Review of evidence\*](#). Barking: CSA Centre.

<sup>2</sup> Ofsted, The Care Quality Commission, HMI Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, and HMI Probation (2020) [\*Multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment: Prevention, identification, protection and support\*](#). Manchester: Ofsted.

The same issues have arisen in a number of serious case reviews involving child sexual abuse. A recent summary of findings from case reviews<sup>3</sup> found that professionals may overlook physical and behavioural indicators of sexual abuse because they focus on alternative explanations from parents/carers or health professionals, or they lack knowledge of the child's history. Incidents, behaviours and physical indicators may be viewed as 'one-offs' because of an incomplete understanding of the child's history. This can lead to delays in putting child protection measures in place.

## The learning report

The CSA Centre has been in the forefront of responding to the above issues, by designing training programmes that equip practitioners and students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to identify and respond to concerns about child sexual abuse. It has trialled two different approaches involving the delivery of such training through existing structures within social work education and training – specifically, the Social Work Teaching Partnership Programme.<sup>4</sup>

This learning report, prepared by the CSA Centre's research and evaluation team, summarises the findings from our self-evaluation of these two pilots: firstly a one-day introductory training course delivered to social work students by the CSA Centre, then a 'train the trainer' approach designed to give staff at higher education institutions (HEIs) the skills to deliver the introductory course themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> NSPCC (2020) [\*Child sexual abuse: Learning from case reviews. Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around child sexual abuse.\*](#) London: NSPCC.

<sup>4</sup> Funded by the UK Government, Teaching Partnerships aim to improve the overall quality of practice, learning and continuing professional development among social workers and social work students, by strengthening links between higher education institutions and employers of social workers (such as local authorities).

# 1. The one-day course for social work students

## Developing the course

The CSA Centre originally piloted a one-day course on intra-familial child sexual abuse, which it had developed over several years, with a group of 450 first-year social work students in August 2020. At the end of the training day, participants were asked to complete a short online feedback form. This was completed by 77 participants (17% of the total): 73 rated the course as 'very good', and four as 'good'.

A further opportunity was presented to test the effectiveness of the course's content and delivery when a Social Work Teaching Partnership approached the CSA Centre to provide training on intra-familial child sexual abuse to social work students in the eight HEIs offering social work courses in the partnership area.

To gauge interest in the pilot project, the then Chair of the Teaching Partnership presented the proposal to the HEIs. All expressed an interest in the programme, and one of their practice development leads (a consultant social worker) was appointed to coordinate the project and act as a go-between with the CSA Centre for any questions raised by the HEIs.

The CSA Centre was particularly concerned to ensure that each HEI had considered the training's emotional impact on their students, and asked the HEIs to provide information on available support services that could be shared at each training day.

## Course aims and learning outcomes

This course aimed to provide an overview of the key issues that social work students needed to know in order to identify and respond to cases of intra-familial child sexual abuse. It had the following learning outcomes:

- Better understanding of:
  - the scale and nature of child sexual abuse
  - how the impact of child sexual abuse presents in children, young people and adults
  - how children communicate their experiences of sexual abuse, and the professional role in helping them do this
  - who it is that abuses children
  - how and why sexual abuse happens in families
  - the importance of a 'whole family' approach to assessing and intervening with families.
- Improved ability to identify the potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviour.
- Greater confidence in identifying and responding to concerns of intra-familial child sexual abuse.

## Participation and delivery

The training programme was delivered to 418 participants across the eight HEIs. All participants were on social work programmes and were in their final year of training, i.e. third-year undergraduate students or second-year Master's students.

Delivery was online via PowerPoint presentation, video material, small and large group work exercises, and discussions. A post-training pack of references and additional resources was sent to the students following the training.

Each course was facilitated by one trainer, with two trainers in total delivering the programme across the eight sites. Both trainers were qualified social workers with a number of years' experience in social work practice within statutory children's services, including frontline child protection and specialist services. They also had considerable experience of delivering training on a range of different issues relating to child sexual abuse, including intra-familial child sexual abuse; harmful sexual behaviour; online child sexual abuse; working with non-abusing parents/carers; working with children who have been sexually abused; and assessment and intervention with alleged and convicted offenders.

## Evaluating the course

Feedback on the course was collected between October 2020 and April 2021, alongside the course delivery. Shortly after each training day, the participants were asked to complete a short, anonymous online survey about their experiences of the course. The feedback received was reviewed as it came in, resulting in some adaptations being made to the training.

Of the 418 course participants, 191 (45%) completed the survey. Of these, 42 specified that they were undergraduate students, and 37 that they were postgraduates; the others did not provide this information, but all were in the final year of their degree.

## Feedback on the learning outcomes

### ***Knowledge of child sexual abuse***

As Figures 1 and 2 overleaf show, more than 95% of the survey respondents felt that they had increased their knowledge across different areas of child sexual abuse.

The few who disagreed explained that this was because they had already possessed this knowledge, but they acknowledged that it was important for others.

Respondents elaborated on how the training had enhanced their knowledge on child sexual abuse:

*"I believe this training (even for those who have knowledge of sexual abuse) can honestly be so helpful. I feel as if I have learnt so much today."*

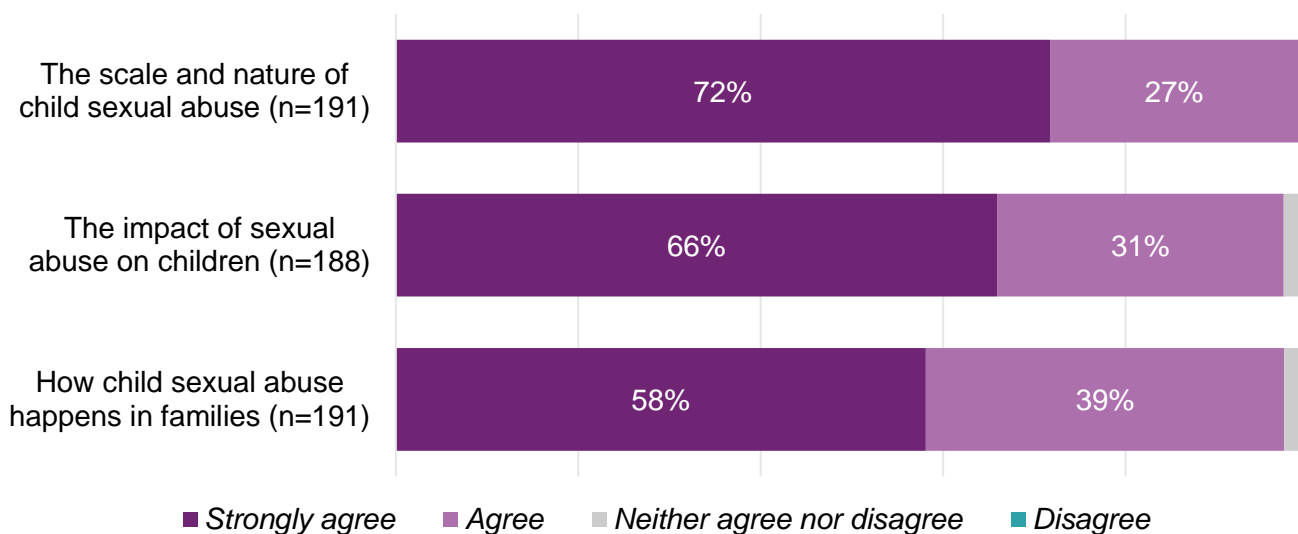
*"Incredibly thought-provoking and the way it was presented was very engaging."*

*"Very informative. Some issues/points were raised which I had no knowledge of. Most questions and concerns around child sexual abuse were answered."*

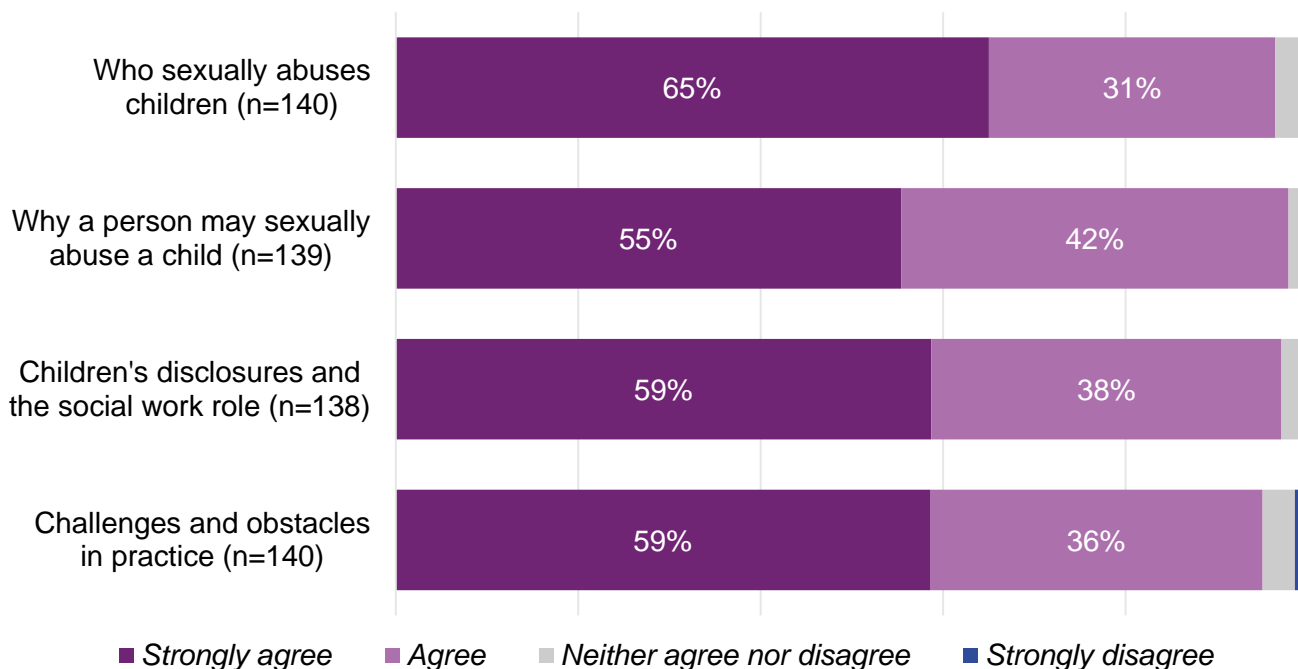
*"I thought this training was absolutely brilliant. It was engaging, interesting and concise. It was explicit at times, which I felt was actually very useful, but previous child sexual exploitation training I have done can be too vague and scared to talk about the actualities."*

*"I have not really considered child sexual abuse before today, and I realised how unprepared I would have been if a child disclosed to me without partaking of this training. I have learnt so much about all aspects of abuse and I know I will be a better social worker for it."*

**Figure 1. Did the training increase participants’ knowledge of the scale, nature and impact of child sexual abuse?**



**Figure 2. Did the training increased participants’ knowledge of perpetration, disclosures and challenges in practice?<sup>5</sup>**



A few respondents identified specific topics that the training had highlighted for them:

*“I have been able to understand how it can be difficult to disclose certain information and how as a social worker one can be able to appreciate and be patient with individuals.”*

*“[I was] shocked at some figures regarding who abuses.”*

<sup>5</sup> Owing to an administrative error, answers to these questions were not collected from 51 of the respondents.



*“[I gained] a lot of new knowledge, e.g. about sibling abuse.”*

*“Very informative and mind-blowing session. Always think the unthinkable when it comes to sexual abuse.”*

*“It was interesting to see implications of racism and child sexual exploitation and how service users from BME communities have an extra layer and obstacles they face in disclosures.”*

Other respondents described how they were now more aware of the need to take a holistic approach:

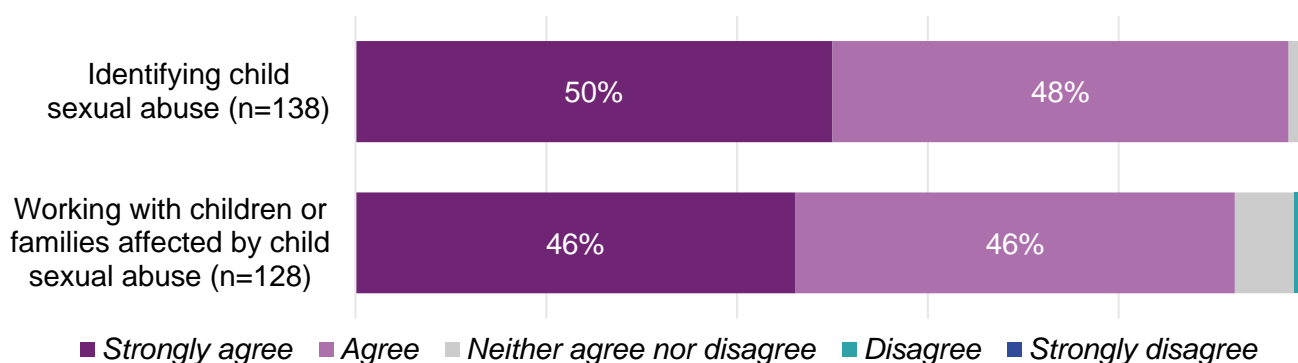
*“It is important to have a holistic approach when working with people that have experienced child sexual abuse, and to understand what causes child sexual abuse and apply appropriate interventions to all the family members.”*

*“This has been a holistic approach to child sexual abuse. It has been really interesting to hear the theory and approaches across all family members and perspectives.”*

### **Confidence in identifying child sexual abuse and working with those affected**

Asked whether attending the training had improved their confidence in identifying child sexual abuse and working with children or families affected by child sexual abuse, the vast majority of respondents agreed that their confidence *had* increased (see Figure 3); regarding work with those affected by abuse, however, 12 respondents were neutral and two disagreed.

**Figure 3. Did the training increase participants’ confidence in identifying child sexual abuse and working with those affected?<sup>6</sup>**



Several respondents explained how the training would help them in their professional practice:

*“The training day has been really beneficial and I will take a lot of the facts and learning into my practice.”*

*“The training was informative and the resources to be sent out afterwards will be really useful. I am currently looking to do my dissertation around the cycle of familial abuse so I found today really helpful.”*

*“This training has been very beneficial to me and my future practice and has given me the opportunity to feel more comfortable in approaching and exploring situations involving sexual abuse.”*

<sup>6</sup> Owing to an administrative error, answers to these questions were not collected from 51 of the respondents.

Additionally, a tutor at one of the HEIs commented on how helpful they felt the course had been for their students:

*“Very informative and well-presented session for students, with excellent activities to help them think about different scenarios and explore their understanding of child sexual abuse. The resources and discussions will help them develop their practice on placement and encourage them to read further research.”*

## Feedback on the course content and delivery

The 191 survey respondents were asked to rate the trainer on a scale of one to five. The vast majority (83%) awarded five stars, with almost all the others (15%) giving four stars. The trainers’ knowledge and expertise were praised, and they were said to have been approachable.

*“Really informed and approachable trainer. Easy to listen to and explained things in a way I could understand.”*

*“Both trainers clearly had a good level of knowledge around child sexual abuse and practical working experience of working alongside children and young people who have been abused.”*

*“The trainers were accepting, available and open to all questions. They made the subject interesting and the training itself was broken into groups, which, as a kinetic learner, was fantastic.”*

Two respondents gave the course three stars, with one suggesting the course was too intense and should have been more trauma-informed:

*“This training should take place in two three-hour sessions, one day apart... It is very difficult to focus on such an emotionally challenging/draining topic in one sitting.”*

However, another respondent noted that the training had highlighted the importance of self-care:

*“I liked that throughout the training we were reminded of self-care, as at points it was triggering.”*

The vast majority of respondents (95%) rated the training materials highly; most of those awarding fewer than four out of five stars explained that they had found the session too long. Similarly, 95% awarded four or five stars for the training method.

*“It was engaging and facilitated student experience, provided lived experience. The presenter was very knowledgeable about the area of study, used research and theory and gave us time for group work where we learned from other students.”*

Some commented on the challenge of participating in training online – but one observed that, given the nature of the content, they had preferred to participate in their own home:

*“This method was a good way of delivering the training for me personally as I found the video quite upsetting so it was good to be able to watch it in my own space.”*

Another felt that a particular exercise used during the training was not appropriate for the setting, however:

*“I thought the activity where you asked participants to write about a sexual experience was inappropriate. I understood that the point was to make us think about how people feel when they are asked to share... but given the subject of today, and that people may have themselves experienced child sexual abuse, I felt it was quite distasteful and potentially harmful.”*

## ***Suggested improvements***

Asked how the training could be improved, respondents made practical suggestions such as splitting the training over two days, making more use of case studies and videos, and increasing the amount of interaction/participation through greater use of activities. A few mentioned specific topics they would have liked to learn more about:

*“More discussion around how social worker becomes involved and the process, e.g. child protection plans etc.”*

*“I would’ve liked to understand what happens next, once abuse has been established... now what?”*

*“Maybe [more on] an after disclosure procedure? Obviously, it is difficult to say, but a general outline about calling police, going to the house, talking to parents, applying for orders, etc.”*

*“Maybe more of a link to social work practice and the challenges practitioners face, day-to-day.”*

One respondent felt that having some guidelines around appropriate language would be helpful:

*“Perhaps some problematic language used by delegates should have been challenged, e.g. ‘prostitution’... I did (happily!) notice that the trainer did not use this language herself; but perhaps the student that did should have been challenged.”*

Another felt that common myths should be corrected at the start of the course:

*“I think that common false knowledge need to be debunked at the beginning of the training so as not to stigmatise delegates or ultimately service users; for example, state that the ‘evidence’ that children who are sexually abused go on to being abusers themselves is not reflected in the research.”*

Others suggested that breakout rooms should be facilitated by trainers, or commented that they had found it difficult to contribute during the session:

*“I think if it was clearly stated at the beginning how we can contribute then more people would have. I obviously can only speak from my own perspective but at many points I did not contribute because I wanted to give others equal opportunity/did not want to talk over other people. On some occasions I did raise my hand to add comments but because of the way the screens were split this was not seen and therefore I did not add anything.”*

## 2. The ‘train the trainer’ course

### Developing the course

Following the delivery of the one-day course for social work students, discussions between the Teaching Partnership Manager and the HEIs revealed that there was interest in a ‘train the trainer’ programme which, it was felt, would enable them to develop a sustainable model of delivery.

In response, the CSA Centre designed a three-day course for HEI staff, during which the one-day introduction to intra-familial child sexual abuse would be taught and practised, with opportunities for skills development in delivering the course to others.

### Course aims and learning outcomes

This ‘train the trainer’ course aimed to provide the HEIs with the skills, knowledge, training materials and resources to embed the one-day introductory course into their own training programmes. This would enable them to increase knowledge internally, reduce reliance on external commissioning, and provide ongoing sustainability of the learning over time.

The course was designed for those whose role already involved sharing knowledge and learning with others, and who were keen to deliver the introductory training on intra-familial child sexual abuse in their place of work.

Learning outcomes included achieving a better understanding of the following areas to enable participants to train others on:

- the scale and nature of child sexual abuse –
  - the challenges and obstacles in practice and how to overcome these
  - how the impact of child sexual abuse presents in children, young people and adults
  - how children communicate their experiences of sexual abuse, and the professional role in helping them do this
  - who it is that abuses children
  - how and why sexual abuse happens in families
  - the importance of a ‘whole family’ approach to assessing and intervening with families.
- increased knowledge of and familiarity with the tools, frameworks and resources that can support practice
- increased knowledge of and familiarity with different exercises and methods of delivering training materials
- increased confidence and skills to deliver training on intra-familial child sexual abuse.

### Course structure

The course was delivered over three days across a three-week period in February 2021.

On the first day, participants observed CSA Centre staff delivering the one-day introductory course. On the second and third days, time was spent looking more closely at key exercises used in the introductory course, giving time for practice in small groups; there was also a session focusing on key principles in

working with sexual abuse, and a session (for which participants were asked to prepare) exploring the opportunities for rolling the training out in the future.

## Evaluating the course

Shortly after the final training day, participants were asked to complete an online survey. The feedback received was anonymised and taken account of at the time, with some adaptations made to the training for future delivery.

Nine out of 19 participants completed the survey; these included lecturers, independent reviewing officers, managers, and those with safeguarding responsibilities.

## Feedback on the learning outcomes

At the end of the course, most respondents felt quite confident in their ability to deliver the training:

*“I have learnt lots from this training and can take so much forward to improve my own teaching and assessment of students. I also learnt lots from listening to practitioner colleagues too and about their experiences in practice.”*

One said that they did not feel confident at all, as they still needed to practise. Others who *did* feel confident also emphasised the need to reflect further and practise:

*“I need to revise what I have learned, study the materials and resources and become more familiar with all the resources.”*

*“I am clear that I now need to familiarise myself with the content again as there is so much and to start to plan how and to whom I will deliver the sessions.”*

*“I will need to do my own research about the different models so that I am confident in terms of answering questions and explaining points on a deeper level; to truly understand the content and not just ‘pass it on’.”*

Most respondents said the materials provided would be useful for them to deliver the training. A few identified additional resources that would help them, such as up-to-date research, a video recording of the first day (observation of the one-day introductory course being delivered), and local data; these have been added to the training materials for future delivery.

## Other outcomes

In addition to the course's intended learning outcomes, the Teaching Partnership Manager has identified that it had promoted cross-organisational communication between local authorities and the HEIs, as well as providing an opportunity for those in social work practice to discuss with those in social work education what social workers need from their training – a discussion that has led to learning and reflection about these institutions' different roles.

In addition, one participant has expressed a particular interest in developing their learning and practice in the field of child sexual abuse within the local authority, and now plans to undertake a PhD examining the interventions that social care can provide to children and families affected by child sexual abuse.

## Feedback on the course content and delivery

Respondents rated the trainers as excellent, finding them knowledgeable and approachable:

*“Staff encouraged discussion and welcomed questions and queries to clarify information. They have also welcomed feedback.”*

All respondents gave the training materials four or five stars, although several noted that they would have liked to have had printed copies of the materials to refer to at home. Overall, materials were considered relevant and helpful:

*“The training materials are really comprehensive and will be able to be used in a variety of ways with staff at different levels of their career.”*

Most respondents felt that there had been enough time to learn the materials, although two disagreed:

*“More difficult to get the time from my organisation to do the prep required. My organisation did not appreciate the amount of work required.”*

*“I would have liked to learn half and then practise half. I feel like I need Day One again now.”*

Similarly, the majority felt that they had been given enough time to practise, although one would have liked more time and two felt there was too much time.

All the respondents said the remote learning had been ‘very good’ or ‘quite good’; it was thought to have been more accessible, as there had been no need to travel, although screen fatigue was identified as a downside. A few respondents noted that working with sensitive content from home had its advantages and disadvantages:

*“I have welcomed the breaks as it is very intense and being at home in a safe environment has some advantages too. I can also see that it might be helpful to participate face-to-face and have the support/listen to the responses of other attendees in-between sessions.”*

All felt that it had been easy to engage with the different parts of the course, with many commenting on how much they had enjoyed taking part:

*“The pace was great and facilitators were always proactive in getting the most from participants. I think you were fabulous!”*

*“This was an excellent programme. The delivery of this training is invaluable for both qualified and qualifying professionals.”*

*“Really enjoyed it. Great opportunity to be able to learn something and to contribute to broader practice development and capacity building in a very important area of practice, which is very much needed.”*

### **Suggested improvements**

Respondents felt that, rather than observing the delivery of the one-day introductory course in its entirety on Day One, they should split this observation over two half-days so they could spend the remainder of each day practising delivery of the course themselves. They also felt they would benefit from more opportunities to talk about delivery methods. The course has now been revised to take account of the feedback.

## Rolling out the one-day introductory course within the Teaching Partnership

Since the delivery of the ‘train the trainer’ course, the Teaching Partnership has set up a working group, involving all 19 course participants, to plan how the learning can be embedded within the partnership. The Teaching Partnership Manager has taken the lead on the necessary administration, dividing participants into smaller groups (with representation across HEIs and different local authorities) to reflect on the materials and adapt them depending on how they plan to deliver the training.

Trainers from the HEIs are currently delivering the one-day course to social workers and social work students, on a number of dates between October 2021 and September 2022. Each training day is being delivered by a lead presenter, a co-presenter and an observer. The observer role presents an opportunity for those who have not yet delivered the course to see it being delivered by colleagues from across the partnership, with the aim of increasing confidence and consistency.

While the Teaching Partnership plans to roll the training out to other agencies, it has chosen to prioritise the training for social workers – there are around 2,000 social workers in the partnership area and there will be 20 places per course. They recognise that there will be other professionals in different roles who will benefit from the training and, depending on take-up from social workers, will decide when to offer the course to others.

The partnership has decided on three questions for its evaluation, and will collate findings after each training day.



## Going forward

A number of issues need to be addressed as the CSA Centre moves forward in delivering the two courses described in this report.

Firstly, it needs to establish how HEIs want to timetable such learning. They may, for example, want to offer the one-day introductory training during Practice Skills days that are already built into their programmes for social work students – and they may wish to divide the training content over the course of these programmes, with more basic half-day training being offered during the 2nd Year BA programmes and 1st Year Master's programmes; and a more advanced half-day during the 3rd Year BA programmes and the 2nd Year Master's programmes.

Secondly, successful implementation of both courses depended on proactive input from the Teaching Partnership itself. For the one-day introductory course, a consultant social worker utilised established relationships with HEIs to plan delivery dates. For the 'train the trainer' course, the Teaching Partnership Manager took the lead in planning how the programme would be embedded. This involvement by Teaching Partnerships will be fundamental to the success of future initiatives.

Finally, other avenues are being explored for the delivery of training on child sexual abuse to social work students; these include the Step Up to Social Work Regional Partnerships, in which local authorities partner with HEIs to offer social work placements and training.

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**Research and evaluation team**  
**Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse**

**We'd like to hear from you.** If you would like to find out more about our training, from historical successes and learnings to our forthcoming programme or bespoke packages, please contact us at [info@csacentre.org.uk](mailto:info@csacentre.org.uk)