

The Child Sexual Abuse Practice Leads Programme

A briefing

January 2025

Contents

[About the CSA Centre](#)

[Our training](#)

[Improving knowledge, skills and confidence in tackling child sexual abuse](#)

[Why invest in this programme?](#)

[Evidence of success](#)

[About the programme](#)

- [Programme structure](#)
- [Delivery methods](#)
- [What areas will be covered?](#)

[Embedding practice leads](#)

- [Preparation for the programme](#)
- [Selection of Practice Leads](#)
- [Support during the programme](#)
- [Sustaining the role](#)

[Appendix 1: Practice Lead Role Options proforma](#)

About the CSA Centre

The CSA Centre's 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.

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

We seek to bring about these changes by:

- producing and sharing information about the scale and nature 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 

Our training

The child sexual abuse practice leads programme is a rigorous 10-session programme involving one- or two-days' learning per month, depending on timings for delivery, with each day comprising a half-day of formal teaching and a half-day of reflective case discussion which connect evidence to 'on the ground' practice experiences. The sessions use research, evidence, and practice expertise to explore key areas for understanding and addressing child sexual abuse.

As with all our courses, the practice leads programme is delivered by trainers with significant experience in working within the field of child sexual abuse. Depending on which programme you decide upon, facilitators will also have a background in that work. For example, the social work programme will be facilitated by trainers with many years' experience in frontline social work practice; for the voluntary sector programmes they will have experience in delivering services to children, young people and adults; and if a multi-agency programme, you will have facilitators from two professional backgrounds, for example, policing and social work. We are highly collaborative and will tailor course content to your area - including localised information about the scale of child sexual abuse, drawn from official data and comparative national data, to provide a full context of abuse.

Our training is CPD certificated and the content of courses is regularly reviewed to ensure that learners have access to the latest developments in research and practice. We apply vigorous standards of monitoring and evaluation to all our work, and examples of previous evaluations of the practice leads programme can be found on our [website](http://www.csacentre.org.uk).

Since our establishment, we have engaged over 16,000 practitioners through face-to-face and online events and training to safeguarding professionals across multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, local authorities, the voluntary sector and adult services.

Improving knowledge, skills and confidence in tackling child sexual abuse

Far more children in England and Wales experience sexual abuse than are currently being identified and protected, and the latest data suggests the gap between recorded experiences and experiences of abuse could be widening. Our moderate estimate is that 15% of girls and 5% of boys will experience some form of sexual abuse, before the age of 16.

Repeated reviews, inspections and inquiries have identified the lack of knowledge, skills and confidence held by professionals in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse, most recently, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's national inquiry into child sexual abuse in the family environment. While this review looked specifically at intra-familial abuse, many of the issues identified are equally applicable to practice in respond to many other forms of sexual abuse:

**"I Wanted them all to Notice": Protecting children and responding to child sexual abuse within the family environment
The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel
(November 2024)**

Similarly to previous reports including the Joint Targeted Area Inspection into child sexual abuse in the family environment (2020), this report found that practitioners working with children and families have not been equipped with the knowledge, skills and practical guidance to respond confidently to children where there are concerns of child sexual abuse. Of particular note:

- Practitioners' fears and misunderstandings about talking to children need to be urgently addressed across the whole system, including those in universal services, safeguarding, law enforcement and other specialist services.
- There is an over-reliance on children to verbally report their abuse, when research indicates that there are multiple barriers to them doing so. Practitioners need to be able to recognise and respond to the physical, emotional and behavioural signs and indicators of abuse.
- Stereotypes and assumptions around both victims and those who harm, and a lack of understanding of grooming and coercive control, were seen to impact on practitioners' ability to recognise signs of intrafamilial child sexual abuse while other harms such as neglect may distract from the concerns of sexual abuse.
- Practitioners need to recognise the impact of racism, including bias and wider systemic experiences of discrimination on how children and families perceive and experience barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse, their experiences of, and interactions with, institutions in relation to child sexual abuse, and the nature of support that victims and survivors receive.
- Practitioners lack training in child development and trauma, which affects their ability to identify and respond to signs of possible intrafamilial sexual abuse in disabled children.
- Crucially, practitioners need to have a better understanding of the profound impact of intrafamilial child sexual abuse on children's lives, development and wellbeing, and how this manifests in distress which can be evident in their behaviour.

Why invest in this programme?

A lack of adequate training over many years across all agencies has contributed to systemic failures to support and protect children. And yet, while sexual abuse can impact every area of a child's development, the quicker it is identified the better, and with the right support people can and do recover from their experiences. While working within the field of sexual abuse is emotionally challenging, and can feel complex and even scary, there are so many things that can be done to make a positive difference to the short- and long-term outcomes of children who have experienced it.

The child sexual abuse practice leads programme will equip the children's workforce with the knowledge, skills and practical resources to minimise and prevent the emotional, behavioural and physical impacts of sexual abuse. This will not only benefit individuals and their families but can reduce the economic and social costs of sexual abuse, estimated to be at least £10.1 billion in 2019¹. Identifying sexual abuse early and responding effectively once discovered will reduce the likelihood of further difficulties in mental health, substance misuse, sexual behaviours, interpersonal relationships and re-victimisation, in turn reducing the challenges faced by parents which often require health and social care intervention.

Investing in the professional development of the children's workforce in this area of practice speaks directly to one of the key recommendations for Government and Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships from the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel research²:

Recommendation 2: Professional knowledge, skills and confidence

Government should take the necessary steps, working with professional bodies, to ensure that practitioners and managers have the necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities, including access to relevant guidance and multi-agency training. This applies to practitioners and managers working in local authorities, police, health, schools and other education settings, probation, youth justice and Cafcass.

Safeguarding partners should undertake a multi-agency training needs assessment, to ensure that their practitioners are able to fulfil their roles and responsibilities in this area. The response to this assessment may require multi-agency and single-agency training initiatives, in a range of formats, supported by evidence informed resources.

Establishing a Practice Lead approach within an organisation will not only improve the confidence, knowledge and skills of individual Practice Leads, but will build the capacity of the organisation to respond effectively to child sexual abuse as Practice Leads cascade their learning with colleagues. As a result, children, young people and adults about whom there are concerns of sexual abuse should benefit from a more effective, evidence-based response to the issues they face.

¹ [The economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674441/sexual-abuse-costs-2019.pdf)

² The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (November 2024). "I wanted them all to notice": Protecting children and responding to child sexual abuse within the family environment.

In December 2024, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory recognised the [Practice Leads Programme](#) as an example of innovative practice by highlighting this approach in its 'Seeding Change' series, which shares "green shoots of inspiration" and gives examples of innovative practice.

We believe that improving the professional response to child sexual abuse should be a priority both in terms of reducing the long-term impact of sexual abuse on individuals and their families but also on public services and society as a whole. In establishing an understanding of sexual abuse and offending amongst professionals who work with children, we can increase the likelihood of responding to such cases in a safe, confident, competent and proportionate way.

Evidence of success

"The programme has given me the confidence to talk about sexual abuse and has provided me [with] tools where I believe I could support children and families a lot more effectively than previously."

Child Sexual Abuse Practice Lead

"I have a wealth of resources to refer to, have more confidence in the subject overall, know where I can go to find things out, and have colleagues from the course who I feel confident in speaking to about any matter to do with child sexual abuse."

Child Sexual Abuse Practice Lead

The CSA Centre's Practice Leads Programme is now well-established and has been consistently positively evaluated ([Piloting the programme in social work](#); [in multi-agency settings](#); [in adult substance misuse services](#)). It has been piloted in both England and [Wales](#), [across local authorities](#), safeguarding partnerships, [adult substance misuse services](#) and voluntary sector organisations.

Evaluations have found:

- Practice Leads were more inspired, motivated and skilled to enquire about child sexual abuse, were responding better to disclosures and had dramatically increased the depth and breadth of their awareness, knowledge and understanding of child sexual abuse.
- In particular, the Practice Leads were taking a lead in tackling the fear and uncertainty that surrounds concerns of child sexual abuse, both supporting colleagues and, at times, challenging them to ask direct questions and not let concerns be put aside due to lack of proof.
- Considerable evidence of the Practice Leads disseminating learning by supporting colleagues with child sexual abuse issues, sharing resources, and delivering presentations to wider teams.
- Strong evidence of impact on knowledge, skills, and confidence in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse concerns; this had enhanced practice and enabled Practice Leads to develop as specialists within their teams and wider organisations.

About the programme

The Child Sexual Abuse Practice Leads Programme aims to support 'lead workers' across your local authority, safeguarding partnership, organisation, or service to further develop their understanding, skills

and confidence around child sexual abuse. The programme encourages the transfer and dissemination of the knowledge gained to the rest of their team, service or organisation; improving how sexual abuse is identified and responded to through an enhanced understanding of best practice, research, evidence and practical resources.

In selecting a group of Practice Leads from across your organisation or partnership, the focus will be on:

- 1) Developing the knowledge and skills of individual Practice Leads
- 2) Equipping Practice Leads with knowledge, evidence and resources to disseminate learning across their teams or organisation.
- 3) Facilitating Practice Leads to develop internal cultures / systems of learning and development, linked to the CSA Centre, which supports ongoing best practice in child sexual abuse.

Different areas and organisations have chosen to use the Practice Lead roles in different ways.

Examples of these are as follows:

- Developing a formal in-house consultation offer where Practice Leads advise others within the organisation on cases or practice issues. If this is an option that interests you, see our Practice Leads follow-up consultation offer [here](#).
- Setting up advisory panels which meet regularly and offer all agencies or organisations in their area advice on cases.
- Establishing a training programme for staff within the organisation.
- Situating Practice Leads in key decision-making forums, such as:
 - Within the MASH, where all cases are screened and case notes are added by Practice Leads who advise on courses of action.
 - Attending all strategy meetings which relate to child sexual abuse.
 - On Fostering and Adoption panels.
 - In Care Planning Forums.
- Establishing link roles with other agencies or organisations.
- Leading 'Thinking Spaces' or reflective case discussions.
- Embedding practice resources from the CSA Centre and elsewhere, such as the Child Sexual Abuse [Response Pathway](#).

If you are interested in talking with other organisations or areas about any of these initiatives, please let us know and we can put you in touch.

Programme structure

The 10-day programmes, usually delivered over 11 months, will involve an introductory day followed by 10 one-day learning sessions, each involving a half-day of formal teaching and a half-day of reflective case discussion which connects evidence to 'on the ground' practice experiences. These sessions will use research, evidence and practice expertise to explore key areas for understanding and addressing child sexual abuse. While we recommend an 11 month delivery schedule to maximise the impact for participants, we are able to deliver this programme over a shorter time period if required (e.g. by delivering more frequent one-day learning sessions).

We also offer a 5-day programme focused specifically on child sexual abuse in the context of exploitation, or for services working with adults who have substance misuse issues. Please contact us for more information about these specific models of delivery.

Delivery methods

The programmes are delivered online (face to face could be arranged though this would be at an increased cost) using a range of methods, including:

- Interactive small and large group discussions
- Guest experts (either from the CSA Centre or within the local area)
- A variety of multimedia - videos, podcasts, audio etc.
- Reflective case discussions
- The use of case studies and other exercises
- Resources to support practice
- Booklists and carefully chosen references to explore and learn further on child sexual abuse

What areas will be covered?

The programmes will cover a number of different aspects of child sexual abuse according to the particular programme you have chosen, including:

- Understanding the scale, nature and impact of child sexual abuse
- Working with children, children's disclosures and the professional role
- Child sexual abuse in the family context
- Understanding sexual offending
- Working effectively with non-abusing parents
- Children and young people who have displayed sexually harmful behaviour, including sibling sexual abuse
- Sexual exploitation in the context of child sexual abuse
- Online sexual abuse and offending
- Sexual abuse by females
- Working with adult survivors
- Understanding the child protection process in child sexual abuse cases – Policing, Health, Probation and Social Care
- Substance use and sexual abuse
- Institutional child sexual abuse

For further details on each of the courses see below:

- [The Practice Leads Programme for Social Work](#)
- [The Multi-agency Practice Leads Programme](#)

- [Practice Leads Programme – Child sexual abuse in the context of exploitation](#)
- [Child Sexual Abuse Practice Leads Programme - Working with adults who have substance misuse issues](#)

Embedding Practice Leads

We know from the evaluations into our pilot Practice Lead Programmes and subsequent programmes that the process of embedding a Practice Lead role is fundamental in creating change. We would recommend the following tasks are considered and actioned when commissioning a programme:

Preparation for the programme

We would recommend ensuring 'buy in' for the programme from Senior Managers from the outset, including:

- Identification of a Senior Management named lead who holds overall responsibility for embedding learning from the programme, co-ordinates ongoing support of practice leads and ensures communication with practice leads and the CSA Centre is maintained;
- Senior Management Lead to present to their Senior Management Team groups about the Practice Leads Programme, with support from the CSA Centre if needed, for discussion about how the role can be supported within their organisation;
- This briefing to be shared with the Senior Management Team and all line managers of the Practice Leads;
- Recruiting Practice Leads who will maximise sustainability of knowledge sharing within their organisation. All potential Practice Leads should be sent the briefing in advance to ensure that this is a role they are committed to undertaking, and this includes a 'health warning' about the impact of the programme.

Selection of Practice Leads

It is recommended that Practice Leads are chosen on the following criteria:

- Competent practitioners / managers in their own right, with an established reputation within their organisation for good practice
- Interested in developing their knowledge and expertise in the field of child sexual abuse
- Have some skills and experience in sharing their knowledge with others (e.g., cascading training, delivering group supervision or training)
- Planning to remain with their organisation for the foreseeable future
- Committed to attending the programme and sharing their knowledge

Agreeing how the role will operate within your organisation and ensuring appropriate support is in place for Practice Leads to undertake the role is pivotal. Again, to achieve this, the following is recommended:

- A formal kick-off meeting to be organised for the Practice Lead and their Line Manager/Senior Manager during which options for how the role will operate can be discussed and agreed. (See Appendix 1 for role options proforma).

- Where senior managers are not part of this meeting, senior management sign-off should be attained.
- Consideration of affording protected extra time (e.g., half-day per month) for the Practice Lead to be able to undertake tasks for the role.

Support during the programme

Line manager support is key during the programme to support Practice Leads in their learning and roles. The following is recommended:

- Line managers to attend the first session of the introductory day with their Practice Leads to acquaint themselves with the programme and the expectations of Practice Leads, and a session towards the end of the programme to consider next steps for their practice lead role.
- Line managers to add a supervision agenda item for each supervision regarding discussion of the programme, impact of the learning, and ways to support the Practice Lead.
- Line managers to commit to prioritising Practice Leads attendance on the programme.
- Line managers to allocate cases where sexual abuse is a concern to the Practice Lead in order for Practice Leads to bring live cases for the case reflection discussions.
- Line managers to support their Practice Lead in sharing their learning, for example signposting other staff to seek advice from Practice Lead or allowing time in team meetings to share learning.

Sustaining the role

We know from earlier programmes that where there is strong senior management commitment to embedding the Practice Lead role, the effectiveness of the programme is highest and practice development more likely to be sustained. Some of the ways to maximise this are as follows:

- Supporting the Practice Leads to continue to meet as a group after the end of the programme on a monthly/six weekly basis for two hours. This could offer peer support, a space to plan further dissemination work, strengthening or development of protocols and processes, ongoing planning around embedding the role.
- Offering opportunities within existing meetings, such as Senior Management Team meetings, Practice Forums, Community of Practice events, for the Practice Leads to share their learning and establish their role.
- Organising regular mailshots/inclusion in staff newsletters which tell people within the organisation about the role. This can be supported by Practice Leads adding 'Child sexual abuse Practice Lead' in email signatures.
- Using existing 'knowledge hubs' where resources can be shared within the wider organisation.

Some local authorities have chosen to set up in-house consultation offers led by Practice Leads. To support the transition of Practice Leads from undertaking the course to offering consultation to colleagues within their organisation, some have chosen to invest in the CSA Centre's post-Practice Leads Programme consultation offer. This is a 12 month programme of monthly 2.5 hours sessions facilitated by the CSA Centre alongside the qualified Practice Leads – for more information see [here](#).

If you are interested in booking our Practice Leads Programme, or finding out more about the course, please email training@csacentre.org.uk, outlining your individual objectives and requirements.

Appendix 1: Practice Lead role options proforma

The CSA Centre aims to improve organisational practice in relation to child sexual abuse by offering a training programme which will improve participants' ability to identify and respond to child sexual abuse, and enable participants to support others to identify and respond to child sexual abuse.

We have found that it is helpful for organisations to clarify how the role of Practice Lead will be implemented. The following list presents a menu of options for line managers to discuss with staff who have been selected for the Practice Leads Programme (PLP). We recommend that you identify the options that are relevant for your team/organisation and use this to inform how the role is presented to others and supported within your organisation.

This form will be revisited by Practice Leads halfway through the Programme as preparation for when line managers re-join the Programme for the penultimate session. This will be an opportunity to review the options outlined at the start of the PLP to see how they might work out in practice and to suggest any additional options for the Practice Leads role.

Please return this form to Louise.Middleton@csacentre.org.uk before the PLP starts.

We would like our Practice Lead to:	Yes / No / Maybe	If yes/maybe, what needs to be put in place to make this happen?	What support will they need?
Provide monthly briefings at team meetings to share their learning from the course			
Offer bite-size training sessions to other teams/groups of colleagues			
Share resources from the training			
Be allocated cases of child sexual abuse when they come in			
Provide support to colleagues when they are dealing with cases of child sexual abuse			
Offer consultation / drop-in sessions for colleagues who are dealing with cases of child sexual abuse			
Co-work child sexual abuse cases with colleagues (as part of assessment or intervention)			
Represent their agency in multi-agency discussions/meetings about child sexual abuse			
Advise on the development of local policies and procedures			

Represent our organisation at external events related to child sexual abuse			
Or are there other ways in which you would like your Practice Lead to take forward their role? Please describe what these are.			