Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Identification and assessment skills where child sexual abuse is known or suspected

27 October 2026

Reminder: Looking after yourself

Sexual abuse can be difficult to think about and talk about. Thinking about it and talking about it will affect us all in **different ways**, at **different times**.

It is important that we…

- Be aware of the feelings and experiences of other delegates
- Be kind to ourselves (personally and professionally)
- Respect each other's learning journey

What we will cover today

- The impact of child sexual abuse
- The signs and indicators of child sexual abuse
- How to use the signs and indicators template in practice
- How the signs and indicators template can inform referrals
- How the signs and indicators template can inform supervision
- How the signs and indicators template can structure strategy meetings
- Direct work tools to inform ‘grey areas’ of the template / gather information

The CSA Centre

We are the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre). We want children to be able to live **free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse**.

Our aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response.

We are a **multi-disciplinary team** that works closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.



Far more children are being sexually abused than we are currently identifying and safeguarding

"The current statutory child protection approach to responding to concerns that a child is being sexually abused puts **too much responsibility** on children and young people to recognise the abuse they are experiencing and then to seek a trusted adult to talk about what is happening to them".

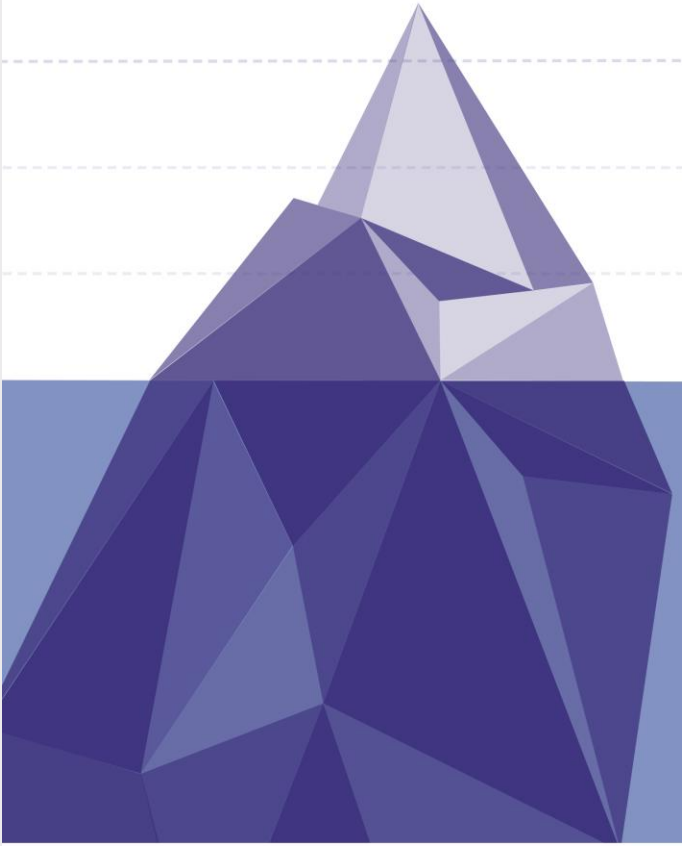
"This is a heavy, and frankly unrealistic responsibility. Children cannot and should not be the only witnesses to the harm they experience; it is the **responsibility of the adults** around the child to respond to help-seeking behaviour and to safeguard them".



CSA Centre Blog: Don't wait for them to tell us: recognising and responding to signs of child sexual abuse (2019)

Far more children are sexually abused than services identify

Scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Review of evidence (2026)
csacentre.org.uk



2,331 children placed on the child protection plan due to child sexual abuse (England and Wales)

43,890 children assessed at risk of sexual abuse* (England)

103,550 child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police (England and Wales)

500,000

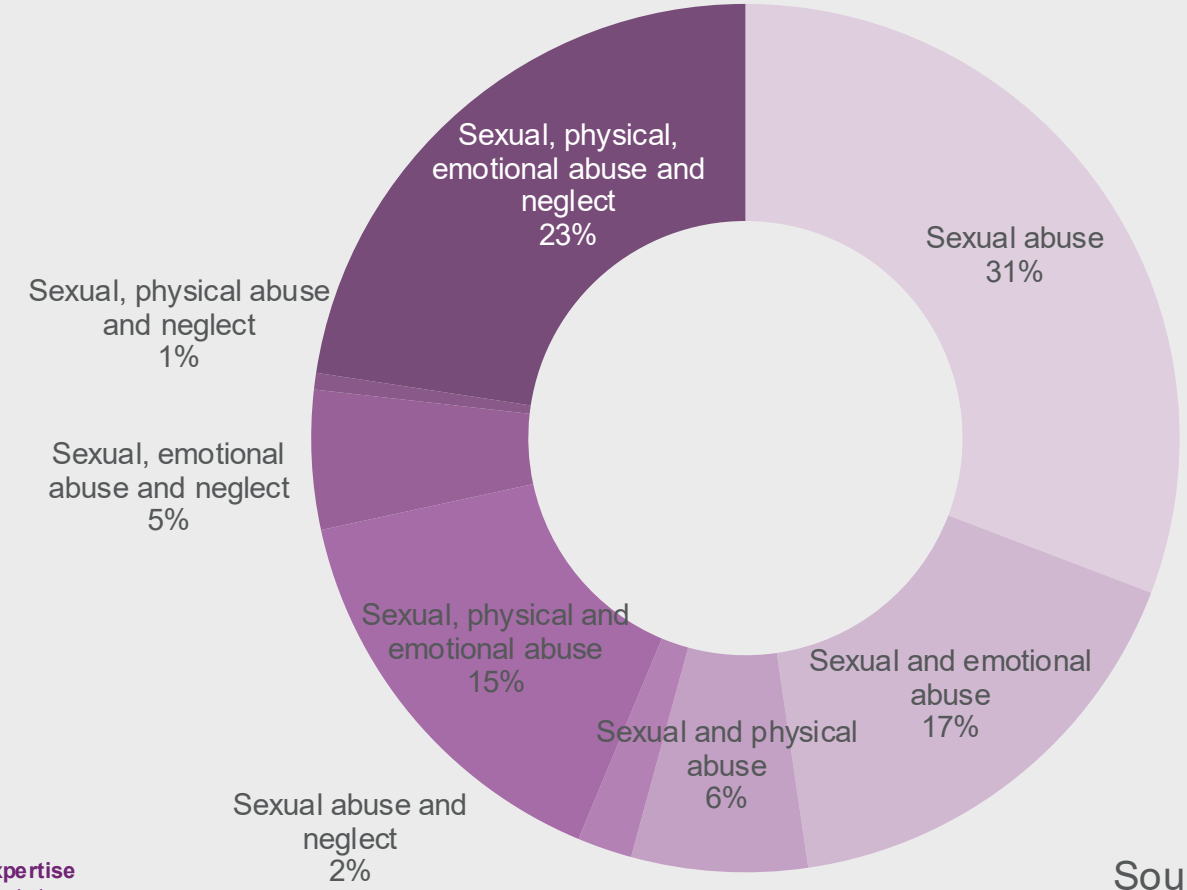
children are estimated to experience contact in-person sexual abuse every year*

Sources: The Welsh Government, 2026; Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes, 2024/25; Department for Education, Characteristics of Children in Need, 2024/25. *Includes assessments recording concerns of child sexual abuse and exploitation.** Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence estimated by age group in Northern Europe, Fang et al 2026 and the Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates, 2024. Please note: numbers are rounded to the nearest ten. Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence for contact sexual abuse estimated by age group in Northern Europe.



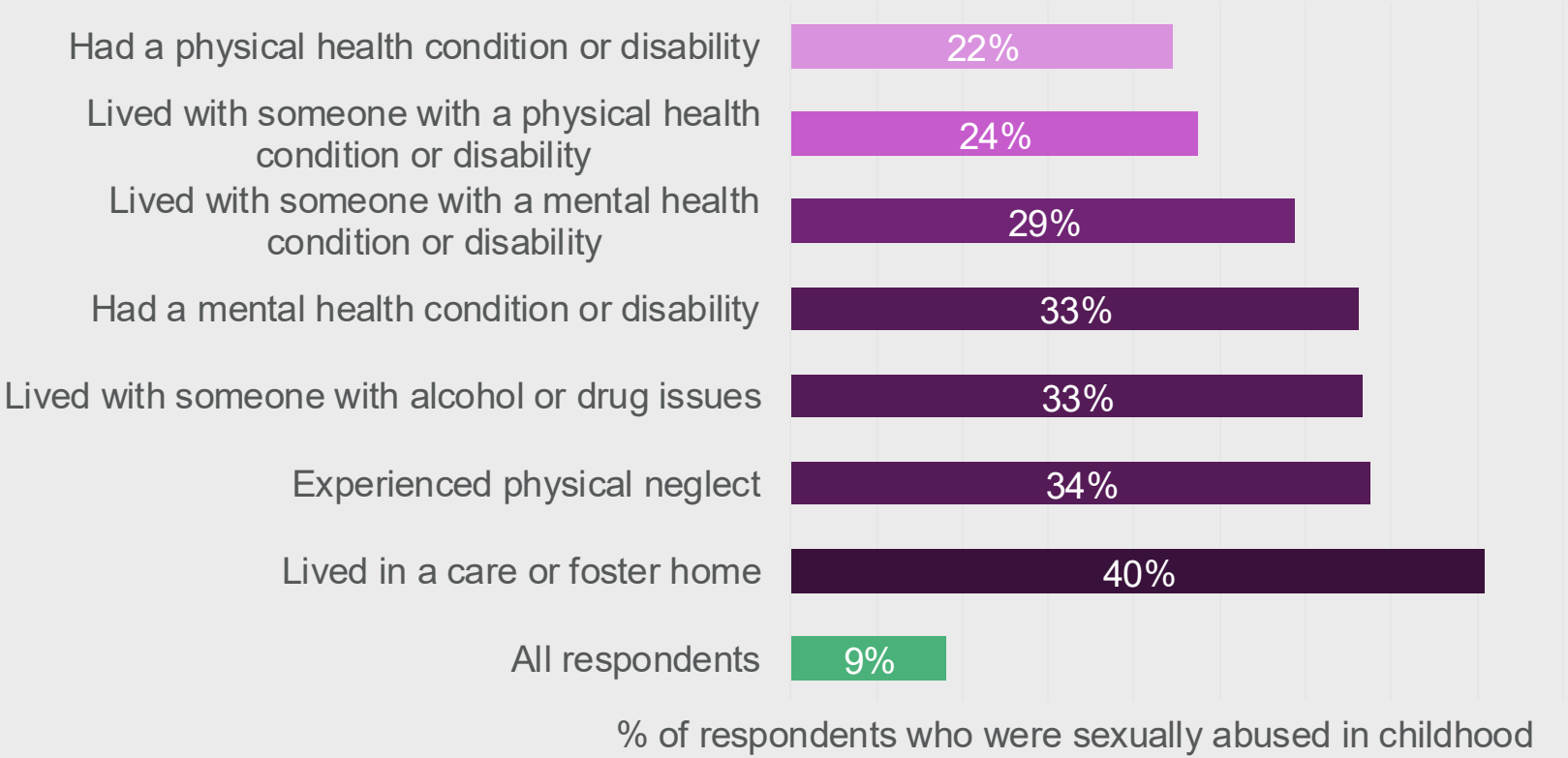
Source: Scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Review of evidence 2026

Sexual abuse usually occurs in the context of other abuse / neglect



Source: ONS, 2025

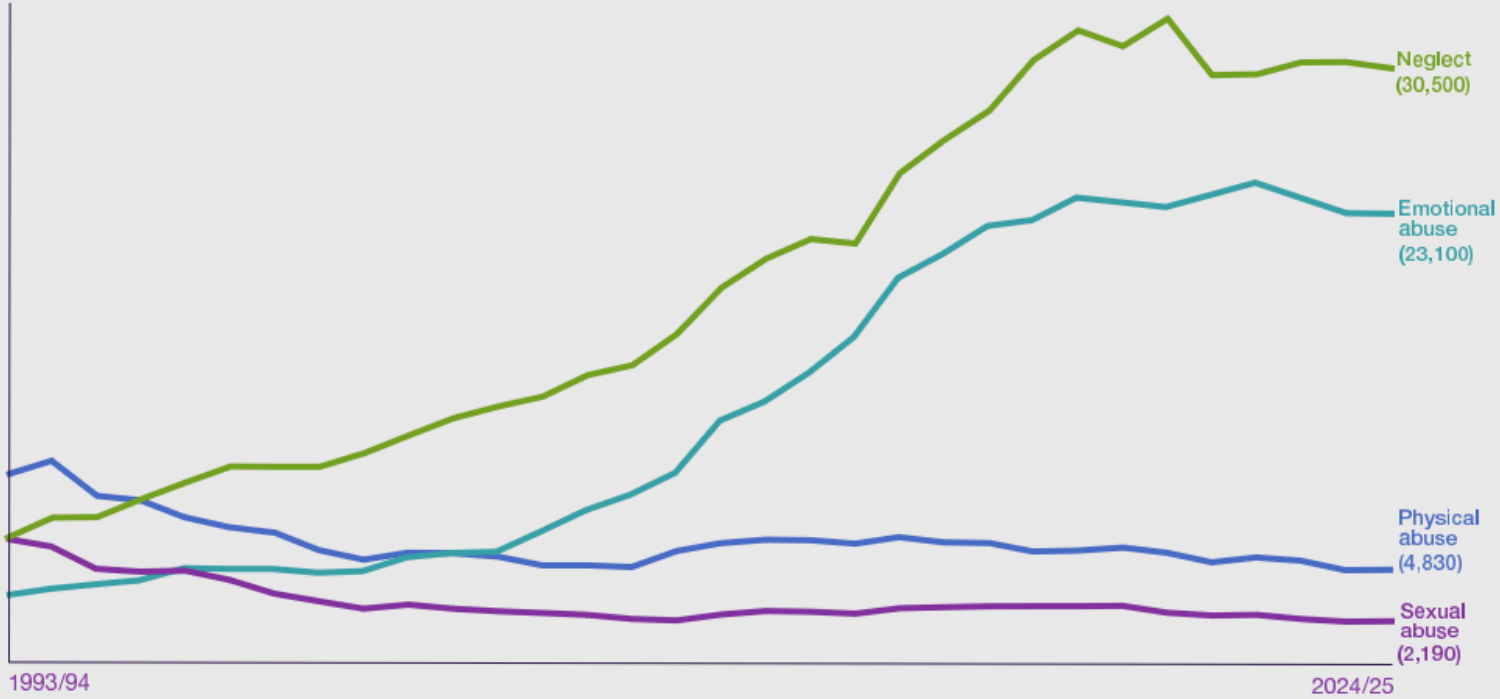
Child sexual abuse often occurred in the context of other childhood difficulties



Source: ONS, 2025

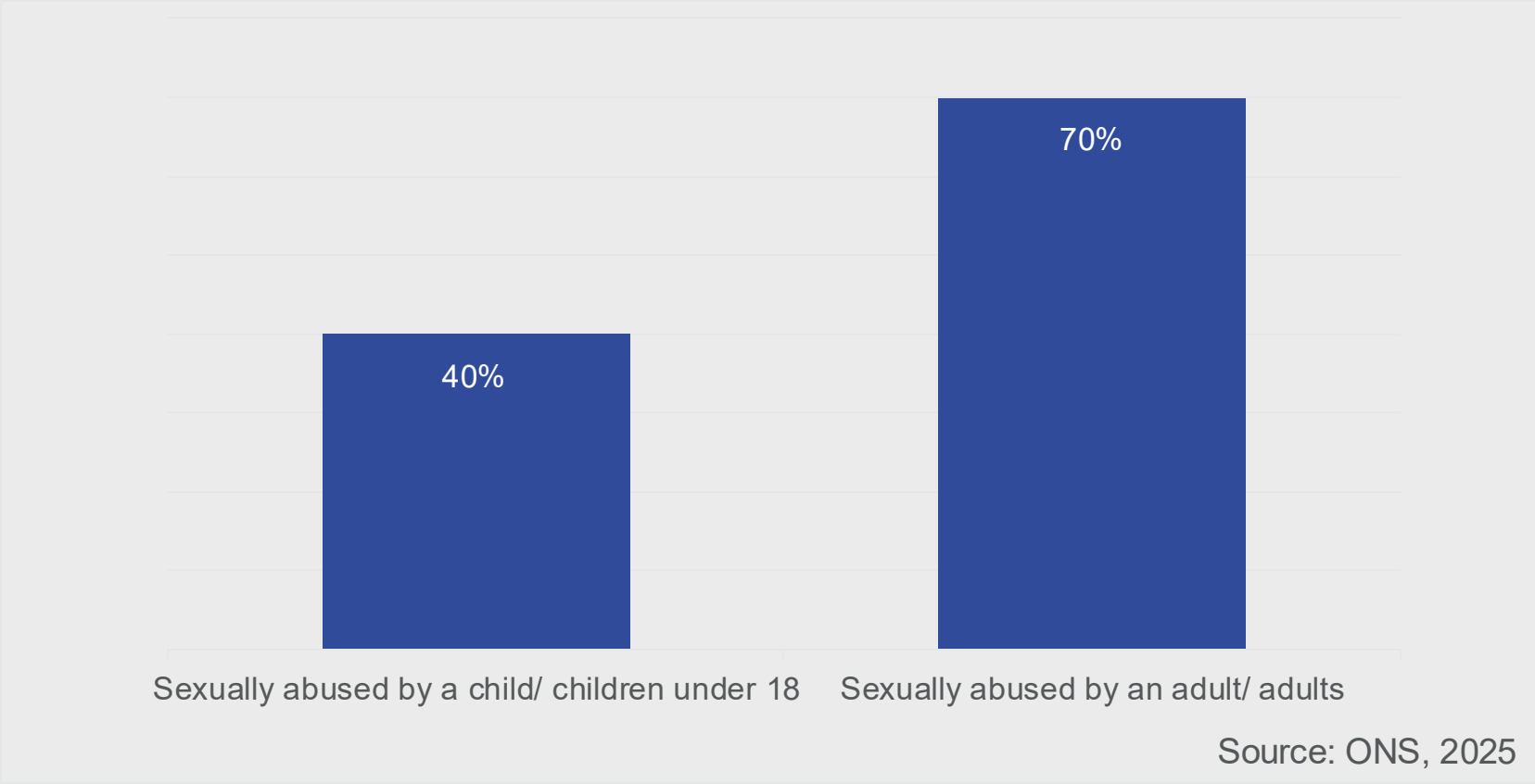
Concerns of sexual abuse are far less likely to be identified and named than other forms of abuse and neglect

Number of child protection plans by form of abuse



Office for National Statistics, Abuse during childhood in England and Wales, March 2024, Department for Education, Characteristics of Children in need, 2024/25

Sexual abuse by under 18s accounts for a significant minority



Source: ONS, 2025

The Data Insights Hub

Local and national data on child sexual abuse in England & Wales

The Data Insights Hub is our **new interactive online dashboard** designed to enable professionals, commissioners and researchers to find, understand and use official data on child sexual abuse.

Using interactive maps and charts, the Data Insights Hub displays official data from local authorities and police forces, alongside up-to-date estimates on the scale of child sexual abuse, **all in one place.**

[Data Insights Hub | CSA Centre]



csacentre.org.uk/data-insights-hub/

The impact of child sexual abuse

Centre of expertise
on child sexual abuse

Impact

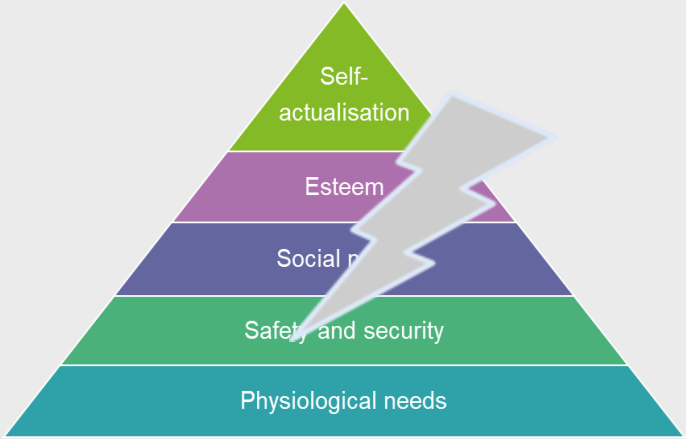
1. Brain



2. Body



3. Unmet needs



(Finklehor, Browne, 1985)

The traumatic impact

Betrayal

Traumatic sexualisation

Confusion

Stigmatisation

Powerlessness

Secrecy

(Finklehor, Browne, 1985)

To blame

Confused

Afraid

Ashamed



Worried

Embarrassed

Betrayed

Angry

How does the impact present in children?

Fear

- They may be scared of the person who has harmed them and be reluctant to see them
- Fear of others
- Lonely and isolated - wary that people will find out about the abuse and reject them

Anxiety

- May feel anxious about the abuse and been threatened by the abuser
- Can manifest as worries about going to school, friendships, being alone, difficulties sleeping

Low mood

- May become quiet and withdraw from friendships, appear sad or reluctant to talk
- Non-organic symptoms (e.g. tummy pain or headaches)
- Immune system may be affected

(Adapted from Rosaleen McElvaney, 2016)

How does the impact present in children?

Difficulty regulating emotions	• Struggle to regulate • Appearing more irritable, hostile, impatient or angry towards peers or adults
Confusion with roles	• May oscillate between appearing ‘grown up’ and wanting to look after others…and… • Appearing more ‘child like’ in their inability to complete tasks
Sexual pre-occupation/ discomfort or confusion about their body	• May display sexualised behaviour outside of their developmental stage, or unexpected sexual knowledge • May be preoccupied with sexuality, engage in repetitive sexual behaviour, masturbating or being fascinated with body parts • Puberty particularly challenging time

(Adapted from Rosaleen McElvaney, 2016)

How does the impact present in children?

Grief

- If abuse by someone the child loves or likes, they may experience a grief reaction in relation to loss of trust
- Can also include anticipatory grief

Disrupted relationships with others

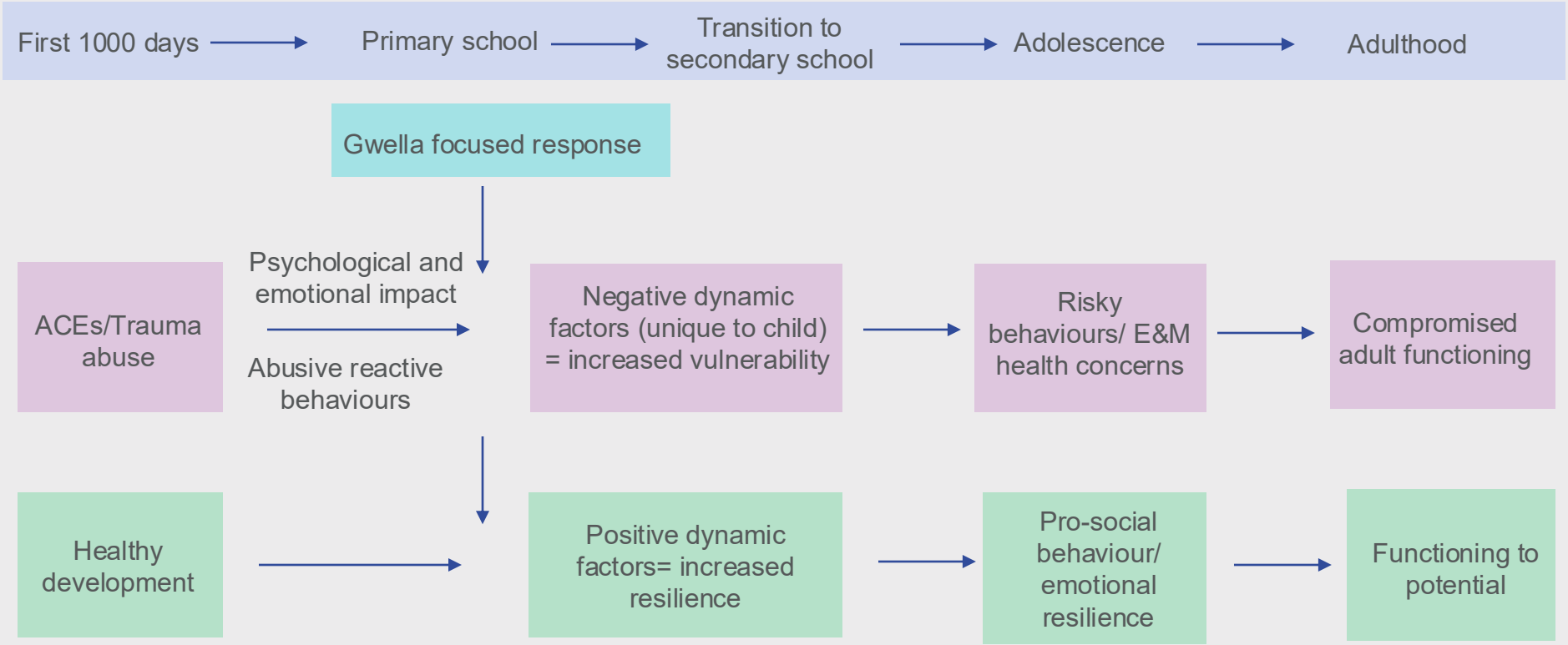
- May be less trusting of others
- Or, they may not want to separate from others and may appear dependent on adults around them

Becoming abusive to others

- May wish to have control over others in response to feeling a loss of control in their own lives
- May manifest as bullying

(Adapted from Rosaleen McElvaney, 2016)

Gwella (To Heal)



The signs and indicators of child sexual abuse

The evidence:
Sexual abuse is rarely ‘clear cut’

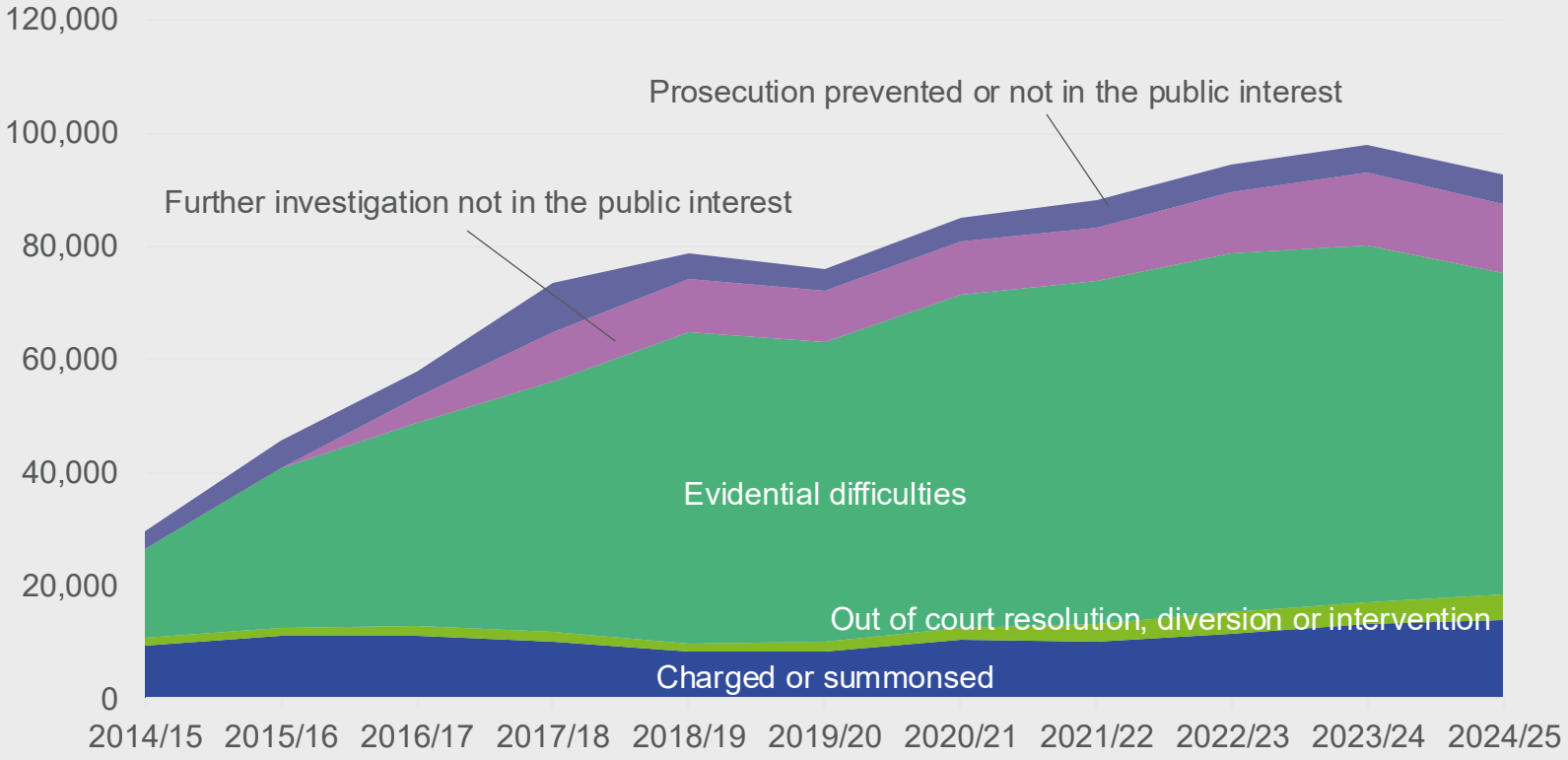
How can we ‘absolutely know’ abuse has taken place?

- Clear disclosure…repeated at least twice
- Medical evidence of sexual harm
- Admission of guilt from perpetrator
- Witnessed by someone else
- Images/computer records of the abuse exist

Rarely will we reach a position of ‘absolute knowing’



Police child sexual abuse investigation outcomes, 2014/15-2024/25



The Burden of Proof

Beyond Reasonable Doubt



Balance of Probabilities



The implications of a ‘no further action’ decision

An NFA decision from Police/CPS has undue influence over the remainder of the system’s response to children.

- *The police have taken NFA so there’s nothing we can do*
- *There’s no evidence the child has been abused*
- *The child made must have made this up*
- *I can’t say I believe the child if there is no evidence for it*
- *There is no evidence this child was previously abused*
- *We can’t refer to specialist help as there’s no evidence it happened*
- *The family won’t work with us now, and we don’t have the evidence to make them*

The recommendation therefore is that all services use the phrase “*No further police action **at this time**”*

Building a picture of concerns



Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Signs & Indicators of Potential Concern

Behaviour of the child/young person

Sexual abuse is a hidden crime and many of those who experience it do not report their experience for a number of years. Professionals must remember that all behaviour is communication.

Physical signs

There may be physical signs in a child which may indicate sexual abuse

Behaviour of those around the child

When building a picture of concerns it is important to note the signs and indicators of abusive behaviour (including grooming behaviour) in **the people around the child**

Environmental signs

It is useful to understand the family or environmental context within which the child is living, as some factors increased vulnerability to sexual harm

Avoid assumptions
Especially those based upon:



Gender



Ethnicity



Religion



Disability



Sexuality

What are your challenges as professionals in practice and what are the barriers for families in talking to us about child sexual abuse?

What do you think prevents families in some communities speaking to us as social workers and other professionals, about child sexual abuse?

“What I needed at that particular time was somebody who was sensitive enough to see that this was a vulnerable person here. The issue was actually not about the anger and the aggression, or the violence, it’s actually about somebody who was actually crying out for help.”

“People don’t talk about it”: Child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities, IICSA, June 2020

How to use the signs and indicators template in practice

How to use the template

To **inform**, rather than determine, professional decision-making.
It is a structured professional judgement tool

Acts as a **prompt** to help decide when to talk to children, their parents/carers or other agencies – and what to talk to them about.

Use **dynamically**, following on from an initial gathering of information

Take a **multi-agency** approach.

Explanatory notes set out why specific signs/indicators have been included and how they relate to different groups of children.

Space to make **notes** including the context of the observation.

Consider what needs to **happen next**.

The layout of the template

- The child's details
- Details of the person completing the form
- Behaviours in children which can indicate sexual abuse
- Physical signs in a child which may indicate sexual abuse
- Behaviour in those around the child
- Environmental signs
- What to do next
- Explanatory notes
- How the template was developed
- Sources of information cited

Understanding and responding well to signs and indicators to support safeguarding responses

Children's Social Care

To inform discussion at a strategy meeting

As a contribution to analysis of need and risk when undertaking S17/ Care and Support or S47 assessments

To identify risk factors and vulnerabilities to address in interventions with families

For use in supervision for case discussion

In preparation for a child protection conference, child in need meeting or child looked after review

As a recommendation by Conference Chairs/IROs

To gather evidence to identify if further action can be taken

Within a bundle of evidence for Court

To support learning about signs and indicators of sexual abuse

Youth Justice:

To use alongside the completion and review of AssetPlus assessments

What actions can you take?

Consider whether:

Your organisation / agency holds further information which could be added

The picture indicates that further exploration with the child or their parents / carers is needed

The picture indicates a level of concern that warrants a prompt safeguarding referral

The picture indicates a level of concerns that should be shared with other key professionals in your agency

Further monitoring of the situation is needed.

Recording

- Professional judgement
- Substantiated either by fact, or backed up with evidence from what has been seen or heard
- Opinion is recorded as such
- Reasoning, analysis, conclusion

I am concerned that X and Y may be being sexually abused. This is because of the following:

List potential indicators (in child, people around the child, environmental factors)

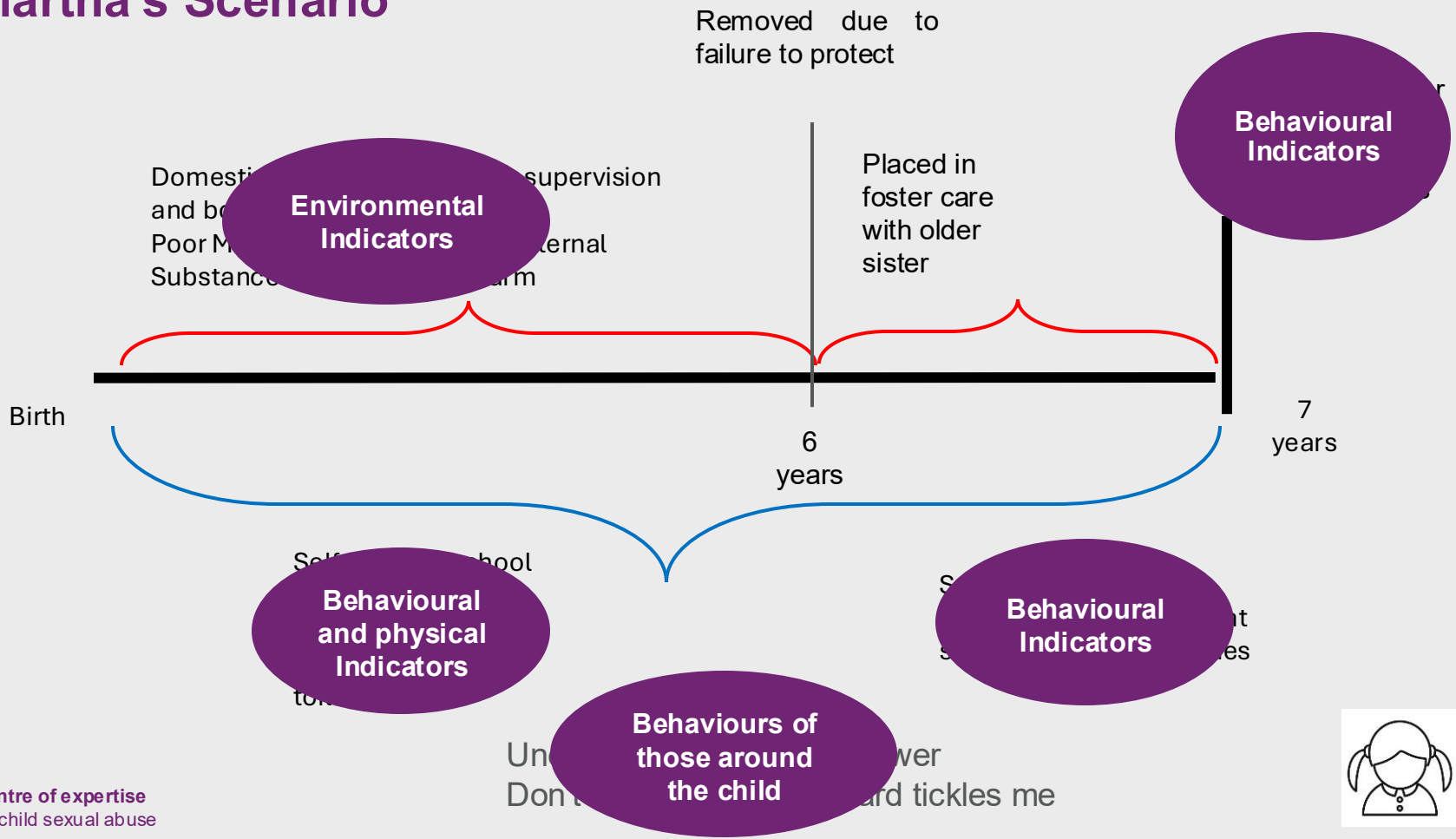
These may be signs of other factors in X and Y's life, however in order to explore this hypothesis, I will:

List actions that you have identified e.g. speak with other agencies, speak with X and Y.

An opportunity to try it in action
Case study: Martha



Martha's Scenario



An opportunity to try it in action
Case study: Mary-Erin



Scenario

During direct work with Mary-Erin, it was found that Barry had been encouraging his daughter over a period of years, to provide intimate-care to him. He gave her latex gloves to wear and would show her how to wash his penis, which she later learned was masturbation. Barry would ejaculate and tell her that meant she had done a good job as it showed everything was clean – suggesting to her The '*stuff*' had to come out to be '*properly*' clean.

Around 3 months ago, Barry started filming Mary-Erin doing this on his mobile, saying other children needed to learn as it meant they were good daughters. Barry said Mary was always too busy to look after any of them and that meant she didn't care. Barry said if Mary-Erin told her mum, she would get jealous that Mary-Erin was doing the things she should be doing and would throw Mary-Erin out. Mary-Erin had been seeing less and less of her mum, who was spending all of her time at her granny and granddad's home and when she did see her, Mary was tired and irritable, telling her to go and speak to Barry and not bother her.

Around a month after Barry started filming, Mary-Erin received a message from someone she did not know on What's App, saying they had seen the video of her washing her dad and if she didn't send a photograph of her naked breasts, they would send the video to everyone in the school. The person then named her school and her year group and said they knew where she lived.

James's scenario

James is 6 years old and is described in file information as displaying challenging behaviour at school. He is noted as having a few friends, but information indicates that most of his peers avoid James. They refuse to sit by James, he is often left out of play dates, party invites etc.

At age 6 years old file information refers to James using sexual language and grabbing the genital and breast/chest area of peer boys/girls at school.



The chronology on file indicates that at this time the below concerns were noted.

- Parental Substance Misuse
- Neglect
- Domestic Abuse
- Parental poor MH
- Animal welfare concerns

James's scenario

At 12 years old, file information refers to James displaying aggressive behaviour towards his peers, adults and damage to property. He is noted to have a few older friends who he socialises with at school and within the community.

James is reported to use sexual language frequently, both as threats and to evoke reactions from others. James is reported to have simulated sex on a male peer at school, this was felt to be an act of bullying by James and was said to be a means of humiliating/embarrassing the other boy. James has also been reported to have exposed himself to a female teacher in the classroom. This was whilst being told off for persistently 'acting up' in class.

The chronology from this point in time indicates the below concerns being present:

- Parental substance misuse
- Neglect - chronic
- Domestic abuse
- Physical abuse
- Parental poor MH
- Perceived rejection by father
- Animal Welfare concerns



James's scenario

At age 15 years old James is made subject to a Referral Order for an offence of rape and sexual assault of a female peer. There are also concerns relating to criminal damage, James associating with peers who are described as being 'anti-social', substance misuse by James and car theft.

Part way through the assessment that relates to the Referral Order offence, a further allegation of rape of a peer female is made against James. James denies this but admits that they had engaged in consensual sexual intercourse.

Concerns highlighted in the chronology at this point in time include:

- Neglect - chronic
- Domestic abuse
- Physical abuse
- Parental MH
- Parental/own substance misuse
- Emotional abuse
- Animal welfare concerns



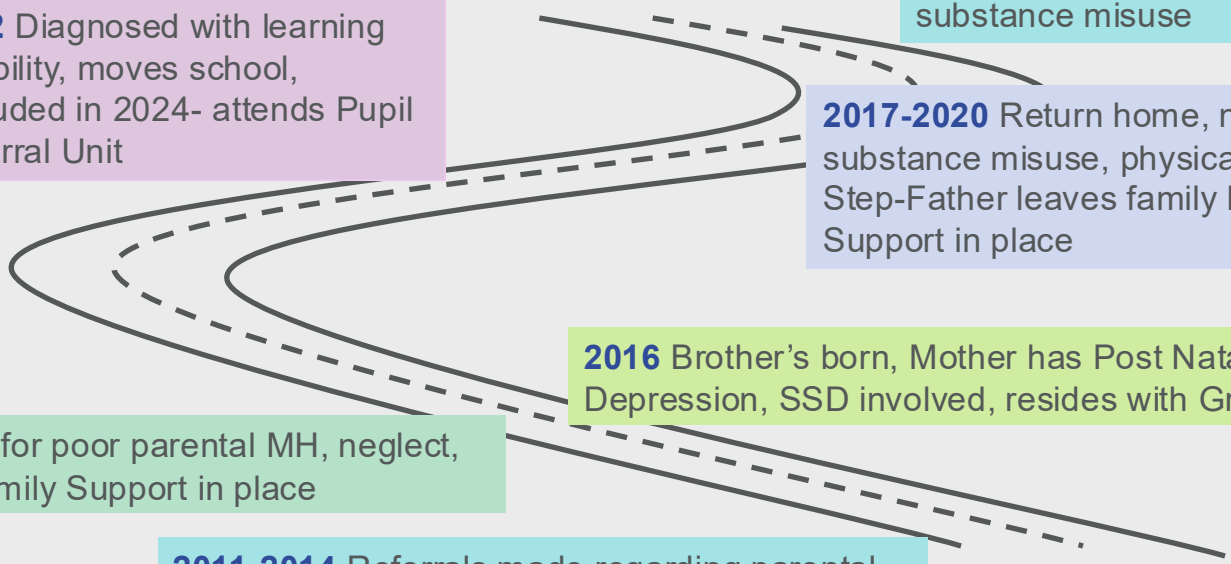
James's life-line

2026 12- month Referral Order for rape and further allegation of rape made

2022-2026 Physical assault, criminal damage, car theft, substance misuse

2022 Diagnosed with learning disability, moves school, excluded in 2024- attends Pupil Referral Unit

2017-2020 Return home, neglect, MH, substance misuse, physical abuse, DA, Step-Father leaves family home Family Support in place



2016 Brother's born, Mother has Post Natal Depression, SSD involved, resides with Grandparents

2014 Referral made for poor parental MH, neglect, Domestic Abuse, Family Support in place

2011-2014 Referrals made regarding parental substance misuse and domestic abuse - NFA

2010 James born

Refocus our thinking

If we are to best help James, we must consider him as his 6 year old, 12 year old and 15 year old self.







James is still our traumatised child, when we lose sight of this we stop understanding his behaviour and see only his risk.

Taking a developmental approach to James



Feedback

Consider grey areas where further information is needed…how would you obtain this information to fill in the gaps on the template?

The use of chronologies and other tools in referrals and decision making

The purpose of Chronologies

Chronologies create a timeline of events for children, in a 'snapshot'

Creating a clear chronology of events can show patterns and themes in a logical timeline; enabling links to be seen

Ensure any 'new' information that is shared, such as a child at the age of 12 years telling us that they were abused when they were 8 years old, features both at the time of them telling us and at the time the incidents of abuse happened

All relevant information from multiple sources, including professional observations and the child's voice, are gathered in one place

The purpose of Chronologies continued…

For the reasons previously outlined, concerns about child sexual abuse are often not followed through with an assessment of the child and family where the primary focus is on whether the child has been or is at risk of sexual abuse.

Unresolved issues can then be lost and are simply filed as part of the child's records.

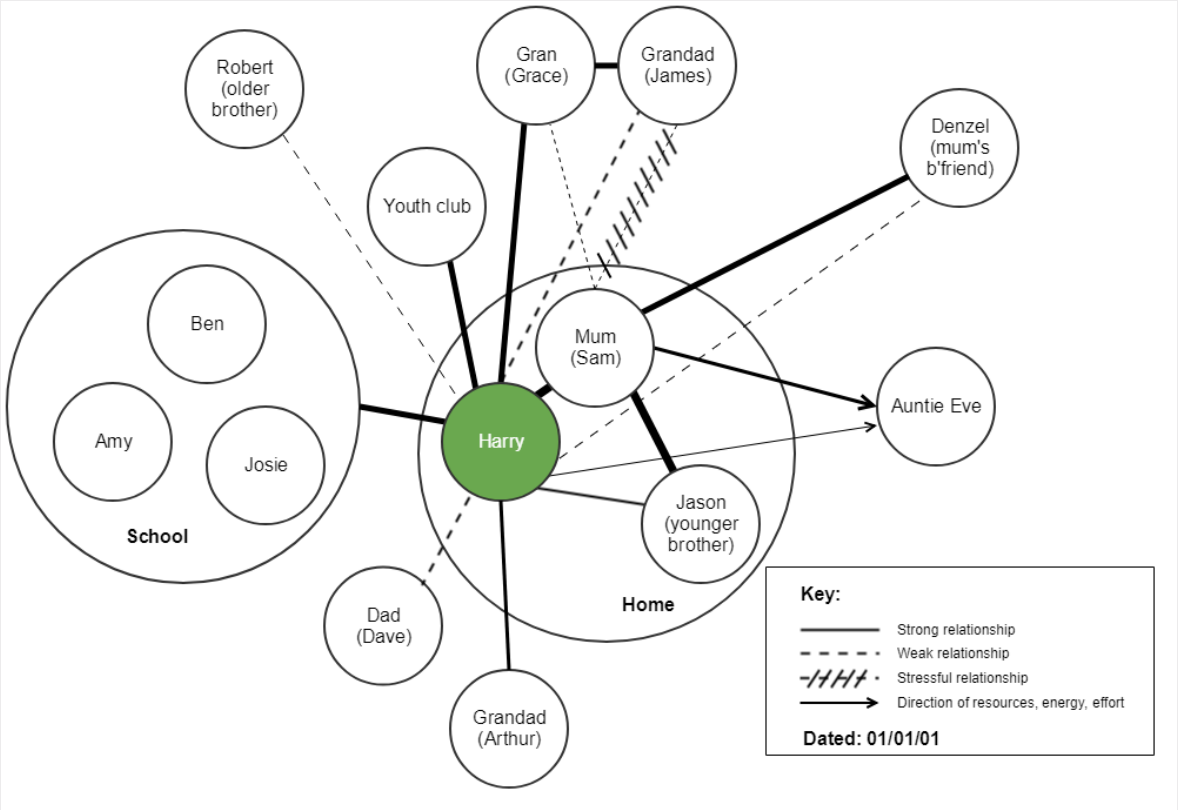
Taking time to review a child's records to see whether there have been previous concerns relating to sexual abuse can pay dividends in helping to build the picture of what may be happening to the child now.

Alongside a 'paper review' of referrals, assessments, or child protection investigations, there is value in engaging members of the family in looking at significant events against changes of behaviour, patterns of concern, shifts in family dynamics etc.

Further work with the child / family to inform the signs & indicators template:

- Target gaps in knowledge, through direct work resources
- Cultural genogram work, using Social Graces
- Matching timelines with chronologies to build a full picture of concern
- Use observations in the home / school to make sense of the child's behaviour and who is around the child
- Understand routines in the home and see if this is replicated in conversations and observations (family dynamics)
- Use the resource, '*Commun-icating with children*'

Cultural Genograms, Timelines and Ecomaps in referrals and as assessment tools



Ecomaps | Safeguarding Network

How the template can inform practice

Clarity

- Bring context to areas of concern for the child, by clearly recording what the issue is, what has been observed and by whom.

Professional curiosity

- To allow further consideration in areas that may have previously been overlooked, but when pieced together, increase worry about what may be happening to the child.

Evidence

- Evidence potential risk of harm to a child, using a structured professional judgement tool, informed by research.

Together, we can do this.

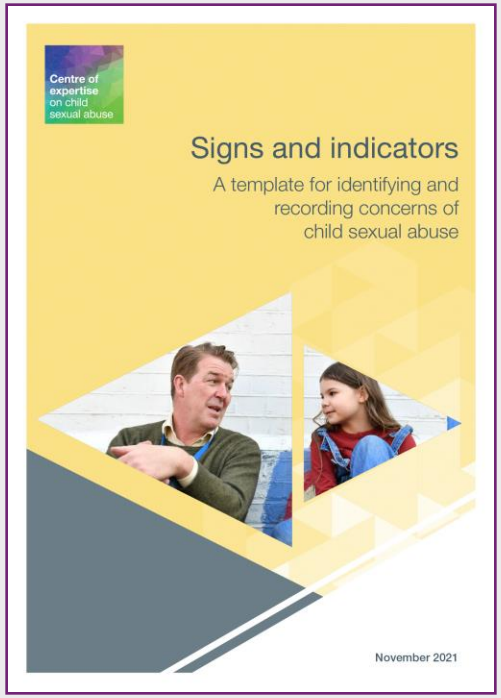
Sign up to our newsletter

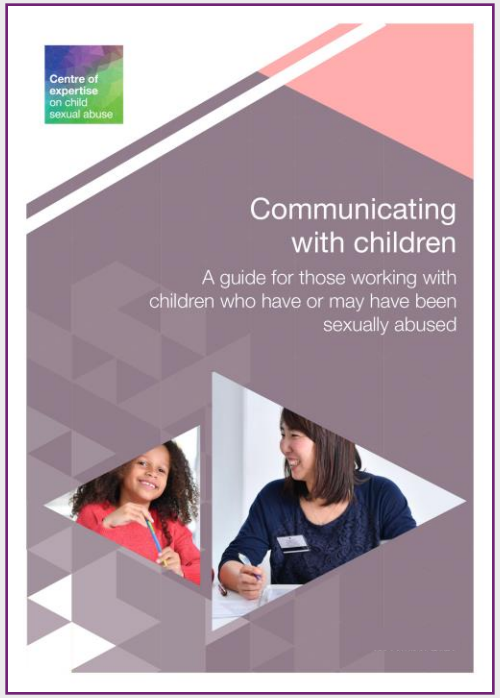
- ✓ Latest research
- ✓ Practice guidance
- ✓ Comment
- ✓ News
- ✓ Ideas

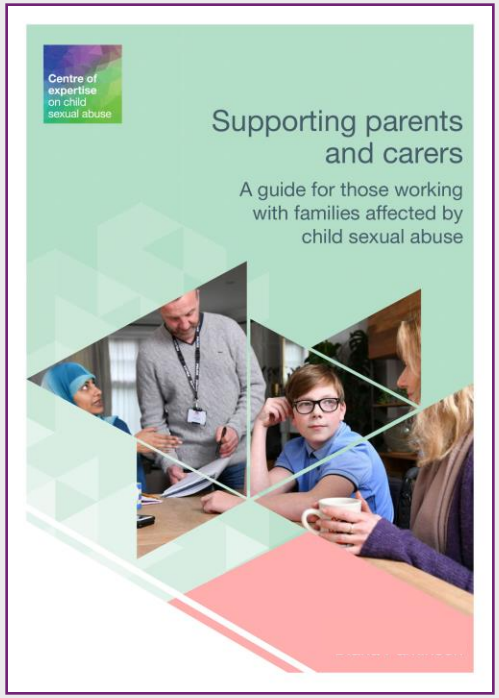
https://www.csacentre.org.uk/subscribe-to-csa-centre-mailing-list/



Resources for practice







All resources are free to download on our site. With 12 short videos covering key themes: http://www.csacentre.org.uk/knowledge-in-practice/practice-improvement/

If you are affected by anything discussed today…

The Survivors Trust - Helpline: 08088 010 818

Find help, support and advice in your area:
https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/

Rape Crisis helpline 0808 500 2222

www.rapecrisis.org.uk

National Association for People Abused in Childhood 0808 801 0331 (not 24 hours)

https://napac.org.uk/

SurvivorsUK

Online help for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape.
https://www.survivorsuk.org/

Any questions?



Thank you

For more information please contact:
workforce@csacentre.org.uk

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Tanners Lane
Barkingside, Illford
Essex IG6 1QG

info@csacentre.org.uk

csacentre.org.uk