

Managing risk and trauma after online sexual offending

A whole-family safeguarding guide



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After reviewing the most recently published research into the risk of offline offending among people who view child sexual abuse imagery, we have revised parts of Chapter 5 on pages 22–23.

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

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

Who we are

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

Our aims

Our aims are to:

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

What we do

We seek to bring about these changes by:

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

For more information on our work, please visit our website:
www.csacentre.org.uk 

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Introduction

This guide primarily covers situations where a parent or carer is under police investigation after accessing sexual images of children online – this may be imagery depicting child sexual abuse, or other sexual images (such as ‘selfies’) which have been inappropriately accessed.

Much of it may also be relevant in situations where a parent or carer is under investigation for accessing other forms of child sexual abuse material online – such as ‘paedophile manuals’ intended to justify the sexual abuse of children and provide direction on how to sexually abuse children – or has engaged in other sexual offences online (e.g. online communication of a sexual nature with a child, or communicating with a child online with the intention of meeting and sexually abusing them).

Please note that this guide specifically relates to situations where the offending parent or carer is living in the family home. However, much of the content will be relevant to situations where a child’s parent living away from the family home, or another family member, is under investigation for accessing child sexual abuse material.

For the sake of simplicity, in this guide we use the term ‘child’ to mean anyone under the age of 18. It is important to remember that children of any age can be sexually abused.

We use the term **‘child sexual abuse material’** to describe all material of a sexual and/or abusive nature accessed online. This includes sexual images of children, moving images and videos, pseudo images (images which appear to be photos, usually made by computer graphics), and ‘manuals’ detailing child sexual abuse.

We use the term **‘offending parent’** to describe a parent or carer (e.g. a step-parent), usually living in the family home, who is under investigation for accessing (i.e. viewing, downloading, sharing, creating, distributing or possessing) child sexual abuse material.

We use the term **‘non-offending parent’** to describe the parent or carer about whom there are no concerns in relation to sexual abuse.

We use the term **‘offline child sexual abuse’** to describe abuse which takes place in person.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for social work practitioners and managers. It has been designed to aid their thinking and decision-making when assessing and supporting a family where a parent is under police investigation for accessing child sexual abuse material.

What is this resource about?

Across the UK in 2021, there were, on average, over 850 arrests for accessing child sexual abuse material every month (Armitage et al, 2023). The ease with which child sexual abuse material can be accessed has led to an exponential growth in the production of images and in the numbers of people accessing them. It is important to recognise that anyone viewing sexual images of children *is involved in the sexual abuse of children*.

Compared with those convicted of other forms of sexual offending, individuals who access child sexual abuse material are more likely to be married and to

have children (Armitage et al, 2023). As a social worker you will need to assess what risks, if any, the offending parent poses to the child or children in their care; this will include consideration of whether these child(ren) have already been sexually abused.

At the point when the police develop intelligence regarding a parent or carer suspected of accessing child sexual abuse material, they will need to liaise with children's social care and a strategy discussion will be held. The police and children's social care will make arrangements to visit the family home to ensure the child(ren) are safe. This first visit, sometimes referred to as 'the Knock', is increasingly recognised as traumatic for families, especially as access is usually facilitated by a search warrant authorised in a Magistrates' Court. The visit is very often the first time the child's non-offending parent (along with other family members) is made aware that there are concerns of sexual offending by their partner, and they are likely to be overwhelmed by shock, fear and confusion.

This resource is intended to support your thinking in this situation; it is not intended to be a procedural document, and does not specify all the processes you should follow. However, it will provide you with the information you need to safeguard and support the whole family at a time of great emotional distress.

This guide brings together research, good practice guidance and expert input from professionals. To keep the text easy to read, sources of information are generally not cited in the text except where specific research studies or theories are referred to, but all sources are listed at the end of the guide.

If there are concerns that the offending parent's own child(ren) may have been sexually abused, it may be useful to read the CSA Centre's **Supporting Parents and Carers Guide** [↗](#) for more information on supporting the non-offending parent.

How to use this resource

This resource is intended for use by social work practitioners when a parent or carer in the family home is under police investigation, or has been arrested, for accessing child sexual abuse material. Each chapter builds on information in the previous chapters, but you may wish to move around the document to find particular pieces of information.

The resource is structured in four parts:

Part A describes the impacts on the whole family when a parent or carer in the family home is under investigation for accessing child sexual abuse material.

Part B sets out what is known about the risks posed by people who access, possess, or share child sexual abuse material, including areas for consideration in your assessment.

Part C contains advice on providing effective support for the whole family.

Part D describes how you can look after your own wellbeing when working with families affected by child sexual abuse, and lists useful resources for you and for the family.



Part A. Understanding the impact on the whole family

Discovering that a partner, who may be the parent of their child(ren), has accessed child sexual abuse material is likely to be one of the most traumatic experiences any parent will go through. That parent is likely to be confused and frightened, and unsure what to tell their child(ren) and how to help them make sense of what has happened.

This section considers the impacts of the discovery on the whole family, including the child(ren), the non-offending parent and the offending parent.

The impact on the child(ren) in the family

“My daughter was here, at the time, and the knock, when the police came to take the devices and that, was absolutely horrendous. It really, really did affect her. She was crying, she was making noises like a wounded animal, she was being sick. Absolutely horrendous.” (Armitage et al, 2023)

This chapter considers how children may be affected by the discovery that one of their parents may have accessed child sexual abuse material.

The adverse childhood experiences model

In the past decade, social work practice with children has become significantly more trauma-informed. The immediate and long-term impacts of early childhood trauma have been described in a body of theory based around the notion of ‘Adverse Childhood Experiences’ or ‘ACEs’ (Felitti et al, 1998).

The ‘ACE model’ suggests that the most commonly identified and documented harmful life events a child might experience can, in combination, lead to a significant reduction in long-term health and life chances. Social work practice with families and children must seek to prevent adverse experiences being a part of a child’s life, or at least intervene to reduce the impact of traumas that have already been experienced.

There are 10 childhood experiences considered by the ACE model: *sexual abuse, parental divorce or separation, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, household abuse of alcohol or drugs, household mental ill health, parental imprisonment, physical abuse, physical neglect, and mother treated violently*. These experiences are not weighted or ranked, and some may be more commonly experienced than others.

Longitudinal studies suggest that an increased number of adverse childhood experiences increases the negative impact on healthy adult functioning and life expectancy. It is important, however, to note that this model does not consider the protective factors in a child’s life which may help to mitigate these negative impacts. None of these impacts is ‘destined’ to happen, and children (and their families) can and do heal from trauma, including sexual abuse.

Seven of these 10 adverse childhood experiences may be a likely consequence of a parent’s accessing child sexual abuse material, so you need to be aware of and responsive to this. Some of these experiences may occur prior to discovery and arrest, and others may be triggered by the discovery.

When working with families where a parent has committed any sexual offence, including in an online space, the possibility that their own child(ren) have been **sexually abused** must be considered and assessed (see Chapter 5). Note too that, if such abuse has happened, it may have been photographed or filmed; a significant proportion of child sexual abuse imagery is produced in the family home.

The child(ren) may also experience **emotional neglect** prior to authority intervention, in that the offending parent may be preoccupied or distracted, and thereby unavailable to them. **Emotional abuse** is also possible, since viewing child sexual abuse material may indicate that the parent has hostile or unempathetic attitudes to children in general, or a tendency to emotional manipulation and control as a means of maintaining secrets. Some adults who access child sexual abuse material admit, after discovery, to other addictions, including **abuse of alcohol and drugs**. Viewing child sexual abuse material may also be connected to depressive episodes, and an attempt to escape from them.

After discovery and arrest, **parental separation** on a temporary or permanent basis is likely, and **parental imprisonment** is a possibility. The child(ren) may be verbally abused and ostracised at school and in the community as a result, and may miss their offending parent and worry about what will happen to them. **Household mental ill health** and **emotional neglect** may also follow, given that the non-offending parent may experience trauma and be unable to process the reality that their partner has accessed child sexual abuse material; as noted in Chapter 2, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common among non-offending parents, regardless of decisions they make about the future of the relationship. Parents experiencing PTSD may not be wholly available to meet their children's needs, at least in the short term.

Our suggestion is that, in households where a parent has accessed child sexual abuse material, social workers should focus on the adverse experiences that a child may already have been subjected to, and equally on experiences resulting from the discovery of that behaviour. While the primary harms are caused by the offending parent, you need to be aware of the risk of creating secondary harms if necessary interventions are not carried out sensitively.

All harms, and potential harms, must be considered when safeguarding the interests of the child(ren), regardless of any criminal justice system outcome or the results of any safeguarding investigation; 'safeguarding', in these circumstances, must consider all the possible harms that the child may have experienced and may go on to experience.



The child(ren)'s emotional responses

When the police (often accompanied by children's social care) make their initial visit to the family home, in many cases this will be the first contact that the child(ren) in the family have had with a police officer or social worker. Unfortunately, children are often present at the time of arrest and so are exposed to an extremely distressing series of events, without any ability to make sense of what is happening.

The child(ren)'s distress may be rooted in:

- witnessing the arrest of their parent, who may have displayed a range of strong emotions
- experiencing their non-offending parent's own distress and confusion (covered in Chapter 2)
- having their home searched
- having their phone, games console or other electronic devices removed
- possible reactions from neighbours
- discussion of their family in the media and on social media platforms
- the loss of friendships, as play dates and other contact with friends are impacted
- grief and loss related to the absence of the offending parent and/or their way of life.


Children are generally reliant on adults around them to help them make sense of situations, and in most situations their parents or other trusted adults in their lives are able to do this. However, when a parent is arrested for accessing child sexual abuse material, the non-offending parent rarely has enough information to be able to make sense of the situation themselves – and their own emotional wellbeing is likely to be impacted, further compromising their ability to help their child(ren) make sense of what is happening. Furthermore, in this situation a child may not be able to turn to another trusted adult, for a number of possible reasons:

- The non-offending parent may be reluctant to let other family or friends know about the situation, for fear of reprisal or judgement, and the child may have been told not to tell anyone.
- Owing to societal judgements about sexual offending, children who tell adults around them may be met with negative reactions.
- In many situations, the child will not know what has happened and will only know that their parent is no longer around.

Whatever the reason, the child is often left in a place of confusion and uncertainty in a situation where those around them are likely to be experiencing a whole range of emotional responses themselves.

Instability in the child(ren)'s lives

Following their arrest, the offending parent may be under investigation for a lengthy period of time before the case is resolved, leading the whole family to feel in limbo. This period of instability for the child can be characterised by a number of factors:

- **Parental mental health difficulties** in either parent, as the offending parent may struggle to manage their shame and the non-offending parent tries to manage the enormity of their situation.
- **Parental separation or divorce**, which may be more likely in the early stages as the family try to navigate a new reality.
- **Stigmatisation** of the child(ren) through association with their offending parent; they may be socially excluded or bullied by their peers.
- **Disruptions in family bonding opportunities**, if the offending parent is not allowed to participate in family, school-related, and social activities.
- **Parental imprisonment** – if this happens, the child(ren) commonly experience a number of challenges. The charity Children Heard and Seen provides an [**information leaflet**](#)  containing advice for professionals on understanding and responding to these challenges.
- **Knowledge of their parent's offending**. If the child(ren) are aware of what their parent has done, this can create confusion for them – for example, they may start to question their own experiences of their parent and their family life.
- **Change to routine and usual family life**. Life for the child(ren) may change significantly following the arrest; for example, their offending parent may have to live elsewhere, possibly meaning that the family have to pay to run two homes.

2.

The impact on the non-offending parent

“It’s an indescribable feeling of despair, and it comes with a lot of emotions: shame; grief; embarrassment; association; worry; your reputation’s on the line, you worry about your home being a target. There’s a hell of a lot to process, and then on top of it, you’ve got to go to work and carry on as normal, and then you’re told you’re not allowed to speak to anyone.” (Armitage et al, 2023)

This chapter will help you to understand the impact of ‘the Knock’ on the non-offending parent, and some of the factors which contribute to this impact. It will also help you think about how the non-offending parent may react upon learning what their partner has done, and the possible reasons for their reactions.

The arrest of a partner for accessing child sexual abuse material often has a profound effect, which may present in ways which mirror the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Duncan et al, 2022). Learning about what their partner has accessed, along with the subsequent engagement with the criminal justice system and children’s services, creates a profound sense of loss as all aspects of the non-abusing parent’s life (including social and occupational) are changed and disrupted. The process of investigation is necessary, but it is important to understand and appreciate the unintended consequences that may arise from it; as Armitage et al (2023) note, *“whilst we cannot avoid arresting [parents suspected of accessing child sexual abuse material], nor can we avoid the impacts of the consequent safeguarding, we absolutely can predict who will be impacted and when that impact will commence.”*

Understanding the non-offending parent’s initial reactions

At the time of the Knock, police officers will enter the family home (often without warning) and go through personal possessions; they may also arrest the partner, possibly when the child(ren) are present. There may be neighbours watching what is happening, which may include the removal of devices and the partner’s arrest.

This may provoke extreme emotions in the non-abusing parent, including feelings of:

- shock and disbelief
- bewilderment
- confusion
- nausea
- terror
- betrayal
- disgust
- shame.

While children’s social care are involved with the family, the non-abusing parent may:

- feel judged or blamed for their partner’s behaviour, especially if the non-offending parent makes a decision to remain in the relationship
- feel that their ability and capacity to protect their child(ren) is being questioned
- fear that their own child(ren) may be taken into care.

In addition to the emotions listed above, the non-offending parent may experience a wide range of sometimes conflicting initial emotions including:

- fear and self-blame that their own child may have been sexually abused
- anxiety around the response from friends and family, and what other people will think of them
- grief around the loss of their previous life and relationships
- guilt, self-blame and worry that they were not a 'good enough' partner
- loyalty towards their partner
- painful memories of their own abuse, if they themselves are survivors of child sexual abuse
- suicidal ideation.

For many, the picture emerging of their partner is far removed from what they know (or think they know) of the person they love and trust – so much so that their initial reactions are likely to include “It can’t possibly be true,” or “You must have the wrong person.”

Professionals sometimes view this as an indication that the non-offending parent is minimising the potential risk of future abuse, and is therefore unable to protect their own child(ren), but denial is a normal and functional defence offering protection against a painful and distressing reality. The non-offending parent may feel that their whole world has been shattered, and denying what they have been told may be an attempt to hold on to some sense of security. Also, it can be extremely challenging for that parent to appreciate that both versions of their partner may be true: that an otherwise loving, caring partner and parent has also accessed child sexual abuse material.



Denial of the behaviour may also occur because of the non-offending parent's fear, confusion or misguided beliefs. For example:

- They may believe that they can deal with the situation on their own, or that their partner won't do it again.
- They may feel that they won't be able to manage the practicalities or financial responsibility of looking after their family if their partner is arrested.
- They may worry that, if they appear to readily accept what they are told, this will be interpreted as meaning they must have already known or been complicit.
- They may also worry that acceptance will demonstrate a lack of faith or trust in their partner. This can be especially challenging when, in all other ways, the partner is trustworthy.
- They may be afraid that statutory agencies will judge them incapable of protecting their own child(ren).
- They may, especially if they have their own experiences of sexual abuse, find it too painful to believe that their partner has accessed child sexual abuse material.

It is also important to acknowledge that the non-offending parent may have been aware of or suspicious of their offending partner's behaviour, but been unable or unwilling to challenge or report it. If the offending parent was abusive towards their partner, for example, they may have used controlling behaviour, threats, intimidation or violence to prevent the partner from looking closely at their behaviour or reporting it.

Further impacts

Criminal justice processes can be lengthy, often leaving the non-offending parent feeling 'in limbo'. During this time, they may struggle to trust their partner, and this may extend to a loss of trust in their other relationships. The non-abusing parent may also face:

- the sudden removal of their partner from the family home.
- the need to move home, owing to fears of repercussions from the community
- disruption to their work and the family income, typically because the investigation has affected their mental health or left them as the sole caregiver, so they have to reduce their hours or stop work altogether; additionally, the offending parent may have lost their job following their arrest
- new expenses such as legal costs, the costs of childcare and therapy, and changes in living arrangements (e.g. sustaining two households for parents who have separated)
- ostracisation from the wider family network and social networks – friends and family may distance themselves and may consider the non-offending parent to be 'guilty by association', or may take the offending parent's side.

The impact on the offending parent

3.

The risk of suicide among men arrested for accessing sexual images of children is estimated to be 100 times higher than the suicide risk among the general population (Key et al, 2021). Several complex, interlinking factors have been identified as associated with risk, including shame, absence of prior criminal contact, being married with children, and the impact of a criminal investigation.

There appears to be a heightened risk of suicide at times when there is a threat of public exposure and when the legal process becomes a reality – for example, at arrest, charge, bail, trial, and conviction (Key et al, 2021). One possible reason for this is the impact of the criminal investigation on the offending parent's wellbeing: this has been identified as a risk factor in almost all studies exploring offending related to child sexual abuse material.

Men arrested for accessing child sexual abuse material often have an overwhelming feeling of shame and (perceived) loss of agency/status among family, friends, community and society at large. For example, they do not generally have any prior convictions, and may have a successful career and enjoy a high status within their community. The revelation of their offence, and the challenges they experience as they engage with the criminal justice system, constitute a traumatic experience which may make them more vulnerable to suicidal ideation.

Many adults who access child sexual abuse material will tell themselves things – such as “The child looks happy so it can't be hurting them,” or “I'm not the one who is directly abusing this child” – to make their abusive behaviour seem ‘OK’. These distorted cognitions seem to protect them from a negative sense of self, but are easily ‘broken down’ upon confrontation. Their ensuing sense of shame and self-disgust, which may also have prevented them from seeking support earlier, increases the risk of suicidal ideation. Furthermore, most adults who offend in this way are aware that their crime is almost universally reviled across all sections of the public, and so the damage to an otherwise untarnished reputation is devastating.

The availability of professional services that can give these individuals non-judgemental support (helping to regulate feelings of shame), while also helping them accept responsibility for their actions, seems to serve as protection against suicide. See Chapter 13 for details of organisations that work with offending parents.



Part B. Identifying and understanding risk and protective factors

Whenever you are working with a family where a parent or carer has accessed child sexual abuse material, you will need to make an assessment in relation to:

- the potential risks that the offending parent poses to child(ren) in the family home
- the non-offending parent's capacity to protect their child(ren)
- the overall safety and wellbeing of the child(ren) in the home.

The process of any assessment will be dynamic – as you gather more information, you will need to integrate it into your assessment. However, to ensure the child(ren)'s safety you may need to make early decisions about risk before completing your more detailed, holistic assessment of needs and risks within the family. The following chapters outline what is known about people who access child sexual abuse material, and how to assess the risks they pose of going on to commit offline sexual offences.

*Note: These chapters focus primarily on situations where the offending parent has accessed sexual images of children. If they have accessed other materials such as 'paedophile manuals' or committed other sexual offences online, for the purposes of your assessment you should work on the assumption that they **do** pose a direct risk to the child(ren) in the home and should not remain living in the home. If a specialist assessment reaches a different conclusion, your assessment should then be updated accordingly.*

Who accesses child sexual abuse material online? Why and how do they do it?


Reflection point

Think for a minute about the image that comes into your head when asked to think about a person who accesses child sexual abuse material. Who do you see? What do they look like? This image may be based on your own experiences, or on a stereotype of what such people look like. How might your perception of who abuses children affect your practice and your ability to recognise and respond to sexual abuse in a range of environments?

The most consistent finding about individuals who view or share child sexual abuse material is that they are mostly adult White European males (Hamilton and Belton, 2022). Compared with men convicted of sexually abusing a child by direct physical contact, those convicted of accessing child sexual abuse material are less likely to have previous convictions, prior antisocial histories, mental health difficulties or substance abuse issues (Babchishin et al, 2015); they are also more intelligent, educated to a higher level, and less likely to be unemployed (Babchishin et al, 2011; Babchishin et al, 2015).

Motivation for and pathways into viewing child sexual abuse material

This section gives an overview of the research in relation to *how* and *why* some adults access child sexual abuse material. It is beyond the scope of this resource to describe all the research in this field, but the following summary should provide enough information to allow you to consider the motivations and pathways to this type of offending. This will inform your assessment, decision-making and safety planning.

We strongly recommend that you also read the CSA Centre's summary of [**Key Messages from Research on Child Sexual Abuse by Adults in Online Contexts**](#) 

The growth of the internet has facilitated the viewing of legal pornography, and the 'Triple A Engine' described by Cooper (1998) explains the attraction of the internet for those seeking pornography. *Anonymity* allows people to view images with a degree of confidence that they will not be discovered. *Affordability*, with free sites and freely exchangeable material replacing expensive DVD purchases, means that the economic constraints on viewing are reduced. Quick and easy access has meant that millions of individuals use the internet as a means of expressing and exploring their sexuality.

It is important to note that much of the legal pornography available on mainstream websites involves a significant amount of exploitative, misogynistic or deviant material, with content including sexualised violence and themes of exploitation (Vera-Grey et al, 2021).

Some adult males who access child sexual abuse material will do so because they have a sexual interest in children, but it is important to note that this is not the case for all men who commit these offences. Many researchers have identified a common pathway into viewing child sexual abuse material, whereby individuals progress from

initially viewing legal pornography. They view more extreme material, and material depicting increasingly younger children (Hamilton and Belton, 2022; Rimer and Holt, 2023). Arousal reduces inhibitions and diminishes the disgust response (Henshaw et al, 2018). Material viewed repeatedly can become normalised and, over time, fail to provide the original level of arousal (Fortin et al, 2018). These processes may lead to engagement with more extreme or deviant material, which can be exacerbated by algorithms that present users repeatedly with similar material (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021). Many men convicted of child sexual abuse imagery offences have likened their behaviour to an addiction (Rimer and Holt, 2023).

For some individuals, the search for – and the anticipation of finding – sexually deviant material itself triggers reward systems within the brain (Steel et al, 2022). Individuals who collect sexual material may find pleasure when they locate rare images or complete a series of images (Fortin et al, 2018).

The Internet Watch Foundation has recently noted a large rise in the number of internet domains created solely for financial gain, particularly around extortion and the production of images by children who have been entrapped (IWF, 2021).

Professionals working with men convicted of possessing child sexual abuse images have noted the disproportionate incidence of autism in that population, which may connect to tendencies to collect and catalogue imagery (Allely, 2020).

Where women are involved in the production of child sexual abuse images, they are usually motivated by a sexual desire for children, typically boys (Augarge and Rydon-Grange, 2022). It is worth noting, however, that some women who access and/or produce child sexual abuse material do so as part of a coercive relationship dynamic with a male partner. While 97% of images reported to the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) depict girls, half of the imagery *showing female abusers* depicts them abusing boys (IWF, 2021); just over half of this content depicts penetrative sexual activity, sadism or bestiality. Evidence suggests that women who access child sexual abuse material online are likely to have histories of intimate partner or sexual violence.

Reflection point

Spend a couple of minutes reflecting on the information you have learnt in this section, and think about any reactions you may have had to it.

Was any of it shocking or unbelievable to you? If so, do you need to think about doing some further reading on a particular aspect or topic?

Have you had an emotional reaction to the information? If so, what might help you to work through that?

Do you need to put this on the agenda for a supervision discussion or seek support from a colleague?

Making early decisions about risk to children and ensuring children's safety

One of the first questions your assessment will need to address is whether the offending parent poses a direct risk to their own or other children. This chapter summarises research which addresses the question “If a parent has accessed child sexual abuse material, does this increase their risk of sexually abusing a child offline in the future, and/or does it suggest that the child(ren) in the household have already been at substantial risk?”

It is vital that liaison between children's services and the police takes place prior to the arrest, so that an initial view of risk can be taken. To fully understand the risk that the offending parent may pose, you need to bear various features of their behaviour in mind. The amount of information available to you will affect how you carry out your assessment, and it may be that some of the information described in this section is not available at the time of your assessment.

For example, having an understanding of the content of the images and the pattern of accessing images can often help you understand the motivations and risks posed by the offending parent. Police investigations now often deploy Digital Forensic technicians to the ‘scene’ so that risk can be identified at the earliest possible opportunity. Part of this ‘triage’ process involves looking for images which have been taken by the person arrested (known as first generation images). However, at this stage a full examination is unlikely to have taken place, so risk may not become apparent until later – but you will still need to make an assessment about the risks the offending parent poses to their child(ren) and possibly to other children.

Making initial decisions about risk and safety

Some research has suggested that adults convicted of accessing sexual images of children, but not convicted of other sexual offences, present a relatively low risk of reoffending through sexually abusing a child offline (Hirschtritt et al, 2019; Seto et al, 2011; Elliott et al, 2019). However, that finding should be treated with caution when you are conducting assessments of adults who have accessed child sexual abuse images *and are living in families*.

This is especially important because intra-familial child sexual abuse often overlaps with other forms of sexual abuse; for example, family members are commonly involved in the production and distribution of online child sexual abuse material (Salter and Whitten, 2022). In fact, most online child sexual abuse material is created at home, with ‘highly traded’ images often involving the abuse of prepubescent girls by their fathers (Seto et al, 2018),


Furthermore, the ‘low risk’ findings above came from research which used official criminal justice data as the source of reoffending rates; child sexual abuse is far more prevalent than official records indicate.

It is therefore vital to look for signs and indicators that any children in the family home, or other children to whom the offending parent has access (e.g. the children's friends, or children in the wider family), may have been or are being sexually abused. For example, ask yourself:

- Are the children thriving?
- What is their relationship like with the offending parent?
- What is their relationship like with other adults in the family home?
- To what degree can they voice their concerns? (Their age and any vulnerabilities, disabilities, etc may reduce their ability to do so.)

The following questions will also help you understand whether the offending parent poses a risk of sexually abusing a child offline. Answering 'yes' to any of these questions might indicate an increased risk of offline sexual offending:

- Has the parent previously been reported to the police, or had allegations made against them to any agency, for 'contact' sexual offences? Or for other sexual offences (e.g. indecent exposure)?
- Do they have other (non-sexual) previous convictions?
- Have they chatted to children online, or chatted to adults about child sexual abuse material or sexual offending?
- Do they have contact with children through their employment or voluntary activities?
- Do they have a history of excessive drug or alcohol use, or are they currently misusing drugs/alcohol?
- Has their lifestyle in recent years lacked structure (i.e. employment and purposeful activities)?
- Are there concerns about abusive dynamics and/or instability within their current or past relationships (e.g. police callouts for domestic abuse) prior to the onset of the police investigation?
- Do they have a recent history of multiple sexual partners?
- Is there anything from the initial searches of their devices that indicates a risk of reoffending? (See Chapter 7 for details of what you might need to think about here.)

You can use the CSA Centre's [**Signs and Indicators Template**](#)  to help you think about:

- any physical, emotional or behavioural signs of sexual abuse shown by the child(ren) in the family
- any behaviours displayed by the offending parent which might suggest they pose a direct risk to their own child(ren)
- any factors within the family or environment which may increase opportunities for abuse to occur.

Whenever there are indications that the offending parent poses a risk of sexually abusing a child in the home, or where there is evidence that there has already been harm, a decision should be taken to remove the adult from the family home.

Reflection point

At this point it is useful to stop and reflect on what you have learnt about the offending parent and the family. If you find you have built a picture which indicates possible sexual abuse of the offending parent's own child(ren), you will need to think about what to do next. Your actions will be determined by the information you have, but talking to the child(ren) should be a priority consideration.

Talking to the child(ren)

The CSA Centre's **Communicating with Children Guide** [↗](#) contains detailed information about the most effective and sensitive way of talking to children who may have been sexually abused.

If you suspect that a child is being or has been abused, you may find that they do not tell you about it when you talk to them. There are many reasons why children don't talk about sexual abuse, including concerns about what will happen if they tell someone.

Ask yourself:

- "What might be stopping this child telling me what is going on?"
- "What might they be worried about telling me?"
- "What else do I need to learn in order to fully understand these barriers?"
- "Can I help the child overcome these barriers – and if so, how?"
- "What additional support might the child need?"
- "Who can I seek advice from?"

Making referrals

You may feel that a specialist assessment of the offending parent's risk, or of the non-offending parent's capacity to protect, is required. Some provisions will be available in your local area, and there are also services available nationally.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation [↗](#) provides advice, risk assessments and intervention for male and female adults who have, or who are alleged to have, committed a sexual offence against a child. It also provides protective parenting assessments for non-offending partners and other family members.


StopSO [↗](#) has a UK-wide independent network of suitably qualified and experienced professionals, trained to work with people who have committed a sexual offence or may be at risk of doing so.

Safety planning



If there are no indications that the offending parent poses a direct risk to the child(ren) in their home, you will need to liaise with the non-offending parent and the police to think about what level of contact is safe for the offending parent to have with the child(ren). Of course, this decision will be influenced by several factors:

- **The wishes of everyone in the family.** The non-abusing parent should never be placed in a position where they are expected to remain living with the offending parent if this is not what they want. Similarly, if there are any indications that a child is not comfortable living or having contact with their offending parent, this must be taken seriously.
- **The response of the offending parent.** The offending parent needs to accept they will have to live quite differently. For example, if they are unwilling or unable to see the need for a safety plan, they are unlikely to follow it; this would indicate that risks in the home, or other contact settings, cannot be effectively managed.
- **The understanding by all family members of the need for a safety plan, and their willingness to develop one together.** For an effective safety plan to be developed, the family need to be able to work together. If there is an unequal power balance and the non-offending parent has less power in the relationship, the dynamics are likely to be such that the family cannot be expected to work cohesively; this may occur where the offending parent is controlling or abusive towards the non-offending parent, where the family's faith or culture considers women and girls to have a lesser status than men and boys, or where the non-offending partner has other vulnerabilities such as mental health difficulties or substance misuse, which may reduce their protective capacity.

Using the CSA Centre's [Signs and Indicators Template](#)  can help you think specifically about any factors within the family or environment which may increase opportunities for abuse to occur.

If a safety plan to support contact *can* be developed, it's important to bear the following in mind:

- A safety plan should always be developed with the family. Everyone living in the family who can understand and engage in the process should be involved. Where members of the extended family are identified as supportive and protective, you may also want to include them in the plan; this is essential if they supervise contact or family time, and is useful if they visit the home frequently, look after the child(ren), or are involved in the daily lives of the family.
- It is important that no-one in the family is given responsibility for something that should not be their responsibility. For example, a child should not be told to "be careful around your parent" or "take care of yourself". Remember that a safety plan is not appropriate in situations where the non-offending parent lacks the capacity to protect their child(ren).
- The safety plan is a working document and should be constantly reviewed by the family, with your support.
- A good and effective safety plan will be written in a way the family feels is representative of them and their situation.

It may be appropriate to share elements of the safety plan with the child(ren)'s education provider(s).

Components of an effective safety plan

- ✓ Developed and agreed by the whole family.
- ✓ Uses language that is meaningful to the whole family.
- ✓ Places realistic expectations on family members.
- ✓ Respects and builds on the existing strengths of the family.
- ✓ Is meaningful to everyone in the family.
- ✓ Considers 'risky times' such as bedtimes, bathtimes, sleepovers, having visitors, holidays etc.
- ✓ Addresses communication within the family.
- ✓ Includes a focus on use of technology.
- ✓ Is respected and supported by the family's wider support network.
- ✓ Allows room for regular review as situations change.
- ✓ Considers key areas such as:
 - bedroom and sleeping arrangements
 - bathroom/toilet arrangements
 - play and other activities inside and outside the home
 - sibling roles and responsibilities
 - family nudity
 - family sexuality, such as how the family talk about sex and sexual development together and around one another
 - family boundaries, considering things like privacy and how that is communicated and respected; how family members communicate their own personal boundaries; physical contact such as 'play fighting'; and how confident family members feel expressing something they don't like or feel comfortable with
 - access to technology.

Ongoing assessment in light of additional information

7

This chapter describes other factors to consider in your assessment, if you have access to the information.

Remember, it is essential to return to the safety plan (see Chapter 6) in light of any new information.

What do you know about the offending parent's online activity?

Although it can take a long time for computers to be analysed, the police will often have information which can contribute to the assessment. For example, they may be able to tell you about the offending parent's browsing history, the nature of the child sexual abuse material that they accessed, the time when they accessed it, and how they have interacted with others online. This will help you to understand whether there are any indications that they pose an increased risk of sexually abusing a child offline.

In a survey of individuals searching for child sexual abuse imagery in the dark web (the part of the World Wide Web that is only accessible by means of special software, allowing users and website operators to remain anonymous or untraceable), respondents who had also sought direct contact with children through online platforms were more likely to have viewed images more frequently, viewed images depicting toddlers and infants, and/or been in communication with other viewers of child sexual abuse imagery (Insoll et al, 2022).

How did they initially access the material?

It will also be helpful to know how the offending parent initially gained access to child sexual abuse material. For example, they may have clicked on links from mainstream pornography sites, or have actively used search terms suggesting that they were trying to access illegal content (e.g. "daddy/daughter incest"). Some adults access child sexual abuse material by engaging with peer-to-peer sharing sites, or with message boards on the dark web. This information will give you some indication of the offending parent's motivations (see Chapter 4).

Addressing common misunderstandings

While understanding the offending parent's online activity is an important part of your assessment, you should be aware of a couple of common misconceptions.

Firstly, do *not* assume that the number of child sexual abuse images discovered indicates the risk of offending offline. For example, if the offending parent is arrested when they have just deleted a large number of images, the forensic analysis may uncover just a small percentage of the images that they once possessed. On the other hand, possession of a high number of images may indicate a desire to collect rather than an indication that the person poses a greater risk of sexually abusing a child offline.

Secondly, the categorisation of the images discovered is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the risk the person poses offline. For example, it may be that accessing 'Category A' images (e.g. images of penetrative sexual activity involving children) requires more skilful use of the internet than accessing 'Category C' images (e.g. images of children behaving in a sexual manner). Consequently, individuals without these skills may simply not be able to access those materials, so their collection may appear less 'serious' than they would otherwise intend. There are, however, some clear exceptions in relation to other child sexual abuse material: for example, the possession of a 'paedophile manual' is a clear indicator that an individual poses a high risk of reoffending both online and offline.

What do you know about the material?

If you can find out about the content of the images that the offending parent accessed, this will provide valuable information for your assessment.

Age of the child(ren) in the images

Individuals who access volumes of material featuring pre-pubescent boys are significantly more likely to pose a risk of offline sexual abuse than individuals whose collecting focuses on older children and females (Seto and Eke, 2015).

Sex of the child(ren) in the images

There is some evidence to suggest that, if an individual has accessed more images of boys than of girls, they may present an increased risk of reoffending online (Seto and Eke, 2015).

Focus on a particular 'type' of child

There is some evidence to suggest that, where images are focused/anchored on children of a particular age and sex, there is a greater risk of offline offending. This may be related to sexual fantasy or interest in children of that age and sex (Long et al, 2013). Consequently, the risks of sexually abusing a child offline, or of reoffending online, are likely to be highest towards such children. This does not, however, mean that risks to other children should be discounted.

Relationship between the child(ren) and the person viewing the images

For example, if an individual is in possession of sexual images of their own child(ren), or other children they know personally, this is a clear indication they have already sexually abused this child and they pose a substantial risk.

Were any of the images produced by the offending parent?

Wherever an offending parent has taken pictures of their own children, they have already sexually abused them and so the risk of further sexual abuse must be assessed as high.

Some websites used to access images require users to produce images before they can view existing images. This exchange is most often noted on the dark web. In these situations, there is a risk that the adult may have taken and shared images of their own child(ren) in order to be granted access to other images.

What do you know about the offending parent's life offline?

Having some understanding of the offending parent's 'real-world' life, including how this interacts with their online activity, will help you to think more about their motivations for accessing child sexual abuse material – and will contribute to your assessment of the risks they pose.

For example, if they have developed offline friendships with other offending adults, this may indicate some level of preoccupation with offending. Similarly, if they struggle to maintain pro-social hobbies, activities and interests, this may also indicate a preoccupation with offending. One of the first steps to promoting recovery and desistance is the resumption of positive activities.





Part C. Providing supportive responses to the whole family

When a parent or carer is under police investigation for accessing child sexual abuse material, the early responses that their family receive are extremely powerful. Positive, informed and non-judgemental responses are typically felt to be supportive, while ill-informed, critical and subjective responses can lead to or exacerbate significant trauma across the whole family.



Key elements of a supportive response

Thinking about the very first interactions you have with the family, as well as how you manage all subsequent interactions, is key to ensuring the family are safeguarded from harm and feel well-supported.

Listen and avoid making assumptions

The family may be in a state of shock. They may not ask the kinds of questions you expect, or they may ask many questions. Listening to everyone in the family, without judgement, is key to building effective and supportive relationships. It may help to adopt a 'teach me' attitude, by asking questions such as "What do you need help with?" or "What are you most worried about at the moment?" so you can understand each family member's individual needs.

Families need to be allowed to work through the multitude of shifting emotions that they may be going through without feeling they are being judged for their feelings. Take care not to make assumptions about the parents, the child(ren) or the family as a whole.

Be credible

Responding from a place of evidence-based knowledge rather than judgement is important, so that families receive the most accurate information. Be sure you are responding from a place of knowledge rather than emotion. To do this, you will need to have some understanding of the literature in relation to adults who access child sexual abuse material – see Chapter 4.

Be direct and honest

Accessing child sexual abuse material is a serious crime. At this stage you may not know the details, so it is important not to speculate or assume. When talking to the family, be honest about what you do know and be clear about what you don't know. It will be useful to ask the police to explain to the family the different stages of their investigation and how long each of these is likely to take.

Be clear that in this situation we are talking about the sexual abuse of a child or children. Sexual abuse thrives in secrecy; not talking directly and openly about it may increase families' feelings of responsibility, anger, distress and confusion, as well as decreasing their safety. Above all, families appreciate it when professionals say what they are going to do and demonstrate that they have done what they said.

Be reassuring and humane

This means acknowledging the feelings of everyone in the family, including the offending parent, offering emotional support and showing empathy in your interactions with them. A compassionate and empathetic manner will also help you to build more effective working relationships with the whole family.

Be accessible

Avoid using technical terms and acronyms. Keep messages short and to the point. Bear in mind that the family are unlikely to have ever been in this position before, and may not know what your professional role is: spending a little time to explain who you are and what your role is can help reduce their confusion and fear. It is also helpful to send a written record to each family member after you have met them, setting out what you have told them and reminding them of things that they need to do. They are likely to be in a state of shock, and may find it difficult to remember things you tell them.

It may also be useful to give information in different formats. For example, if the family have had all their electronic devices seized, they are likely to need paper copies of information rather than details of websites or email addresses.

The **Family Rights Group** [\[link\]](#) has lots of helpful information for parents – including **top tips on working with a social worker** [\[link\]](#), which you may find it useful to read – and offers an advice service for parents, carers and professionals.

Be responsive

There may be key points during any police investigation when risks to family members are increased. It is important to consider the impact of key developments in the investigation on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the non-offending parent and the child(ren). You also need to recognise that the risk of the offending parent attempting suicide is higher at the time of arrest, charge, bail, trial, conviction and sentencing; be responsive to this and ensure that the offending parent has access to support services.

Be informative

The family may have no idea what is going to happen, and this can be terrifying for all of them. It is essential that they are given key information about where they can go for further support at the earliest possible opportunity. For example, the non-abusing parent may need both practical and emotional support.

Share a message of hope

It is important to give families some reassurance. While what has happened cannot be changed, the distress that they are experiencing can – with the right support – lessen over time.

Let the family know where they can go for additional support and information

Chapter 13 contains a detailed list of resources for families in this situation, and organisations offering support. You may also want to pass on the following summary of key contacts to family members:



Useful contact details for families

For children

Children Heard and Seen supports children and their families who are affected by parental imprisonment. www.childrenheardandseen.co.uk

Children can contact **Childline** on 0800 111 for free and confidential advice, or visit www.childline.org.uk

For the non-offending parent

Talking Forward funds peer support for anyone in a situation where an adult in the family has been investigated for an online sexual offence.

www.talkingforward.co.uk

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation works with anyone affected by internet offending. Its Stop It Now! Friends and Family Forum is an online space where the partners, relatives and friends of people who have been accessing sexual images of children, or engaging in other inappropriate sexual behaviours involving children, can anonymously share their experiences, thoughts and knowledge with others in similar situations. <https://get-help.stopitnow.org.uk>
Family members and friends who are struggling with the emotional and practical impacts of internet offending can also access its Inform programme, involving group sessions where they can bring their questions and anxieties and explore them in a supportive environment. www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/inform.htm

For the offending parent

StopSO has a UK-wide independent network of suitably qualified and experienced professionals, trained to work with people who have committed a sexual offence or may be at risk of doing so. <https://stopso.org.uk>

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Inform Plus and Engage Plus programmes offer support to people who have been arrested, cautioned or convicted for internet offences involving sexual images of children or sexual communication with children, to help them stop their behaviour. www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/help-to-stop-offending-online.htm

Safer Lives provides specialist and confidential support to people who are under police investigation for online sexual offences. www.saferlives.com

For the whole family

The Samaritans are there for anyone, whatever they are going through. Their help is confidential and available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You can call for free on 116 123 or visit www.samaritans.org for more information.

Families can get practical advice on a range of issues by visiting www.citizensadvice.org.uk to contact **Citizens Advice**.

You can use the **CSA Centre's directory of support services** to find out about other support services available in your local area.

Supporting the child(ren) in the family

9

This chapter describes what you can do to support the child(ren) in the family when a parent is under police investigation for accessing child sexual abuse material. There are also ways in which you can help the non-abusing parent to support their child(ren) – these are covered in Chapter 10.

Mitigate the impact of witnessing their parent's arrest

Wherever possible, children should not be present when their parent is arrested – but there are times when this is unavoidable. In these situations, the impacts on the child(ren) can be mitigated by having someone available to sit with them and explain, in the most appropriate way for their age and stage of development, what is happening.

Remain calm and offer reassurance

The child(ren) may experience a whole range of emotions – sadness, fear, anger, upset, confusion, disbelief, numbness or anxiety – as they try to make sense of what is happening in their home and for their family. Each child may react differently so let the child know all their emotions are valid.

Be honest

Being honest about what the child(ren)'s offending parent has done, and what might happen to them, is important. If you don't tell them, in an appropriate way, they are likely to imagine possible scenarios which may be worse than the reality. It may be helpful to agree a narrative with the non-offending parent which is as close to a true reflection as possible without being unnecessarily traumatic.

The child(ren) may ask you direct questions; at other times, they may be too stunned or confused to ask you anything. Be sure not to lie to them or to make things up.

What you tell them will, of course, depend very much on each child's age, developmental stage and needs; information will not be helpful to a child who cannot understand and process it.

For advice on how much information to give to the child, you can call the Stop It Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900.

Some of the questions you may be asked are described here, along with considerations for responses.

- **“What is happening” or “what are you doing here”?**

Your responses will of course depend on their age and developmental stage, but if a child is asking you to tell them what is happening it is important to give them a response. For example, you might say something like “The police are worried about some of the things you dad has been looking at on the internet. They need to check all the things that can connect to the internet to find out more.”

The child(ren) will want to know who you are and what you are doing in their home. Remember that they may have never heard of a social worker before, so take time to explain your role clearly.

- **“What is going to happen to my daddy?”**

The child(ren) may have been told that, if they are ‘naughty’, the police will come – and they may have heard of people been taken away to prison. This is likely to be extremely scary for them. It is possible that their parent may be taken away, at least for initial questioning, and you will need to be honest about this.

Ideally you will have had the opportunity to speak to the police before entering the family home, so you will have some idea of how much information they have, what they are proposing to do, and whether any bail conditions are likely to be imposed. You might say to the child(ren) something like “The police will need to speak to your daddy at the police station.” Let them know who they can speak to if they have any questions, and be sure to keep them updated.

- **“Why are the police taking my phone?” or “when will I get my things back?”**

Items such as mobile phones, games consoles or computers are extremely important to many children, and it is important not to underestimate how it will feel for a child to have these taken away from the family home.

Let the child(ren) know that they are not the ones in trouble, but that all devices need to be checked by the police. Tell them that you will speak to the police officer in charge of the case as soon as possible, to find out how long the police are likely to need access to the family’s things. Make sure you follow that up and continue to keep the child(ren) updated.

Separate the person from their behaviour

It is important not to assume how the child(ren) will feel about their offending parent. Adults who access child sexual abuse material may otherwise be good parents with whom their child(ren) have a positive relationship. Be sure not to give the child(ren) messages that their parent is ‘bad’.

Plan your interventions appropriately and in a way that reflects best practice

There can be a tendency to assume that children, especially older children, can protect themselves; unfortunately, this can lead to unrealistic expectations being placed on them to keep themselves safe from abuse.

If there are identified risks to the child(ren) in the family, the offending parent should not be having unsupervised contact or living with them.

In the absence of identified risks, a decision may be taken for the offending parent to continue living at home. In that situation:


- the adults around the child(ren) need to remain alert to any signs that something isn’t right for the child(ren)
- the child(ren) need to be given space to talk about anything that might be worrying them
- the child(ren) should not be given messages suggesting that they are responsible for keeping themselves safe.

Without this, doing ‘keep safe work’ (such as education on what constitutes good and bad touch, for example) could be harmful to the child(ren).


Be consistent and offer continued support

Following the arrest of the offending parent, the child(ren) in the family are likely to face a time of confusion and uncertainty. Criminal investigations can be lengthy, and the child(ren) will need a space to ask questions, as well as support to navigate what may be an extended period.

There are likely to be a number of complexities and uncertainties between the offending parent's initial arrest and the conclusion of criminal proceedings. The matter may not proceed to charge because it does not reach a certain threshold, or further offences may be discovered during forensic examination of the offending parent's computer and phone. The non-offending parent may decide that they wish to end the relationship; they may want contact to cease, or to take place under supervision. The outcomes of those decisions may lead to a private law case, and fall under the remit of the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) as well as children's services. Alternatively, the non-offending parent may wish to continue their relationship with their partner.

For more information about the family court, visit the [Cafcass](#)  website.

Your practice should reflect an understanding of the harm that children in these circumstances often experience, regardless of the eventual outcome. It is important to enable the child(ren) to express their views and wishes, allowing for their age and understanding, and to seek therapeutic support regardless of any criminal or family court proceedings.

If the offending parent is given a prison sentence, you may wish to give parents the details of [Children Heard and Seen](#) , which supports children and families affected by parental imprisonment.

In terms of contact between the offending parent and the child(ren) in the family, you will need to set parameters which take account of evident risks and the offending parent's intentions. Where there are no concerns that the offending parent poses a direct risk to their child(ren), and where the child(ren) want to have contact with that parent, provision can be made for them to maintain a relationship during the criminal investigation. This contact will need to be risk-assessed, and may need to be supervised: the non-offending parent may or may not wish to undertake this role, and other family members, suitably briefed, may provide that supervision. Contact centres should be used only as a last resort.

In the longer term, with the criminal matter resolved and a greater understanding of risk arrived at, family reconstitution may – depending upon the views and intentions of the parents and child(ren) – be considered. If the parents are to remain separated (either because one or both of them wishes for that, or because of an Order made by the Family Court), other considerations will follow.

Supporting the non-offending parent

This chapter describes supportive actions you can take with the non-offending parent, including actions to help them support their child(ren).

For information and guidance on supporting parents and carers whose children have been sexually abused, see the CSA Centre's [**Supporting Parents and Carers Guide**](#) 

Share information honestly and check they have understood it

Different agencies often have different views on the information that should be given to the non-offending parent, especially during an ongoing police investigation. For example, the police may not feel it is appropriate to share information because this could affect a criminal investigation, while children's social care feel it is important to share it so the non-offending parent has all the information they need to appropriately safeguard their child(ren). Safeguarding should be at the heart of your intervention, so it is important to reach an agreement with other agencies which has safety at its heart.

Bear in mind that, after being told detailed information, some people will later state they were not told it. If the non-offending parent does this, do not immediately disbelieve them; consider whether they might have disassociated from the detail (i.e. had a trauma response) and therefore been unable to process it or to recall it later. They may need to be sensitively re-told the information over time, so that they can digest it. However, it is important to consider how much detail they actually need to know.


If the non-abusing parent does not seem to be understanding the seriousness of the situation, try not to get frustrated – and resist any temptation to 'up the detail' you give them in an attempt to 'make them' understand. This often has the opposite effect, causing them to shut down and disassociate from the pain of hearing the information.

By the same token, it is very hard for a parent to protect their child from a risk that they don't understand. Parents cannot be expected to protect without the necessary understanding of what they are protecting their children from.

Help them process what has happened




As detailed in Chapter 2, learning that a partner may have accessed child sexual abuse material is a significant trauma – as is the subsequent involvement with the criminal justice system and children's services. It is important that you try to appreciate the reasons for the non-abusing parent's response, whatever it may be, and remember that their behaviour is probably a response to their trauma rather than being aimed at you.

If the non-abusing parent is denying that their partner has done anything wrong, repeatedly reminding them of what has happened is very unlikely to be helpful. Equally, if they move from a position of denial to one of acceptance, you should not interpret this as evidence of disguised compliance; they are likely to be demonstrating genuine change. Parents may take time to come to terms with what has happened.

You may wish to read the CSA Centre's [**Supporting Parents and Carers Guide**](#)  to learn more about the common reactions of parents and carers on learning that their children have been sexually abused.

Providing the non-abusing parent with clear, accessible information, and giving them time to process this, is a positive way in which you can help them acknowledge what has happened.

In many cases, the non-abusing parent will choose to stay in a relationship with their partner. There are a number of reasons why they make this decision, including but not limited to the following:


- They may feel they are able to fully appreciate the risks their partner poses and may be confident they can manage them. Working together with the non-offending parent is key to being able to accurately assess their ability and capacity to protect their child.
- They may feel they are unable to cope without their partner, and may worry about how they will manage day-to-day life in the absence of their support. In that case, you will want to think about what practical support they may need, and how you can help them access it; for example, it may be useful to help them contact [**Citizens Advice**](#)  in the first instance.
- If there has been domestic abuse by the offending parent, the situation may be more complex. A victim of domestic abuse – together with their child(ren) – may be at increased risk of harm if they decide to end their relationship; they may feel they can better protect themselves and the child(ren) by staying in the home. Furthermore, the offending parent may have deliberately reduced their space for action as part of the abuse – for example, by limiting their access to resources or connections such as family and friends. In this situation you should consult professionals who specialise in working with people affected by domestic abuse and/or coercive control – for example, you can contact the [**National Domestic Abuse Helpline**](#) . The Home Office's [**Statutory Guidance on Domestic Abuse**](#)  lists other sources of support and guidance.

In some situations, the non-offending parent may feel that their partner is a good parent in other respects (in that there are no signs or indicators of sexual abuse nor of a direct risk to the child) and may consider it important to keep the whole family together. This may be a carefully considered decision. If your assessment supports this view, it will be important to help the non-offending parent work through what will need to be done so that the family can rebuild their relationships.

There will also be situations where the non-offending parent does not believe what has happened. It may be useful for them to know that most police investigations into the accessing of child sexual abuse material are instigated by the receipt of technical intelligence from service providers: a report that, say, an indecent image has been downloaded at a particular address will be confirmed by a reliable and technically sound source, so the purpose of the police investigation is to understand the circumstances around the offence rather than to establish that it took place. In most cases, therefore, there is no potential of mistaken identity or other human error.


Help them work through who they might want to tell


The non-offending parent is likely to worry about who will find out what their partner has done, and they may fear repercussions. Unfortunately, non-offending parents are sometimes told not to, or decide not to, tell anyone about what has happened; this can lead to feelings of isolation, confusion and fear.

If they would like to speak to someone but have reservations about talking to anyone they know, they may choose to access services where they can engage with others in a similar position. One example is the [**Family and Friends Forum**](#)  facilitated by The Lucy Faithfull Foundation – a space for family members and friends of people who have been viewing sexual images of children or sexually communicating with a child online. Here non-offending parents can seek support from others in similar situations, by anonymously sharing experiences, thoughts and knowledge.

If they would prefer to join a group and not remain anonymous, they can contact [Talking Forward](#) , or [The Lucy Faithfull Foundation Inform programme](#) .

Help them manage family life during the police investigation

Supporting families through the police investigation, and helping them to navigate the criminal justice process, will be extremely beneficial, especially as these processes can be lengthy. Police forces in Wales have developed the [Helpful Family Pack](#) , designed to be shared with non-offending parents so they can better understand the criminal justice process.

There are a number of resources which offer parents advice and guidance on supporting their children and protecting them from sexual abuse. You may wish to tell the non-offending parents about the [Parents Protect](#)  website, for example.



Help them consider what to tell their child(ren)

One of the questions the non-abusing parent is likely to ask you is “*What do I tell my child(ren)?*”. In general, the child(ren) will need enough information to help them make sense of what is happening, but will not usually need or benefit from detailed information.

For example, it may be helpful for them to be told something like “*The police are worried about some of the things that Dad has been looking at on the internet,*” but no more than that. Messages need to be appropriate to the child’s age and level of understanding; proportionate responses are more likely to leave the child feeling able to ask questions and communicate anything that may be happening for them.

You may find it useful to give the following advice to the parent.



Sharing information with your child

Give your child the space and time to process the information, and opportunities to speak to you about it – not just at the time but on an ongoing basis.



Share information in a way that is appropriate to your child’s stage of development. Children do not need unnecessary detail – they just need to be told enough to help them understand what has happened.

Let your child know which other people know about what their parent has done, and what they know about it.

Think about the language you use. Telling your child that someone was naughty and has gone to prison may leave them worrying that they will be sent to prison if they are naughty.

If your child knows about what their parent has done, try to help them separate the person from their behaviour: it was what they did that was wrong, not the whole person.

Regularly check with your child whether they have more questions or want to talk more about how they are feeling.

The charity **Children Heard and Seen**  has produced an **information sheet**  containing advice on telling children about their parent’s imprisonment. While many of the families you support will not be affected by imprisonment, the information contained gives some helpful considerations.

Supporting the offending parent

In order to support the whole family to manage the risks and trauma of the offending parent's behaviour, you will need to think about how you can support the offending parent themselves.

Men on bail for possession of child sexual abuse material are at very high risk of suicide, as explained in Chapter 3. Parental suicide is incredibly traumatic for children, so considering how you can help mitigate the risk of the offending parent's suicide is key to safeguarding their child(ren).

One of the first things you can do is provide the offending parent with details of support services. A number of services are available (see Chapter 13); aside from being potentially life-saving, they can assist the parent to gain insight into their offending with a view to ensuring they do not offend again.

The rest of this chapter explains how, when working with the offending parent, you can manage any negative feelings you may have towards them.

Separate the actions from the person and avoid making judgements

A key indicator of risk of suicide among men arrested for accessing child sexual abuse material is **shame**. In your interactions with the offending parent, it is important not to imply that you are judging *them* (as opposed to their offending).

Reflection point


Think for a minute about how you feel about working with men who sexually abuse children. Do your feelings differ if they have viewed sexual images of children or harmed a child in person? Do your feelings differ depending on the age of the child(ren) they have harmed?

You may experience a whole range of emotions when faced with an adult male who has sexually abused a child, and it is important you spend some time thinking about how these emotions may affect your work. For example, do you automatically assume that a man who has looked at sexual images of children poses a risk of sexually abusing their own child?

It is important that your work comes from an evidence-informed perspective, so you may want to revisit Part B of this resource. You may find it useful to talk through your feelings in supervision, and Chapter 12 provides information on how you can take care of your own wellbeing while working in this area.

Avoid making assumptions

At the early stages of statutory or criminal involvement, the offending parent may express views suggesting that they lack empathy or have little insight into their offending. This does not necessarily have any connection to their risk of reoffending. There are many reasons why they may not be completely honest with you about the images they have been accessing, especially in the early stages after their arrest. To some extent a level of denial is a natural reaction, and does not necessarily indicate that they pose an increased risk of viewing further images or sexually abusing a child by direct contact.

Evidence-based interventions can support the offending parent to take control of their behaviour, giving them some confidence in their ability to desist from reoffending in the future. **StopSO**  provides long-term interventions on a voluntary basis, and HM Prison & Probation Service offers intervention programmes for offenders in custody and those subject to community sentences.





Part D. Meeting your own needs

It's important to take care of yourself when working with families affected by child sexual abuse. This should include using your supervision sessions, but you may also want to obtain professional support or access further resources to support you in your work or to share with the family.

Taking care of your own wellbeing

The impact on you

Supporting families to cope with and recover from the impact of sexual abuse can have a psychological and emotional impact on you as a social worker.

The effects can include:

- feeling overprotective towards children in your life
- having trouble sleeping
- feeling angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- finding it difficult to empathise
- experiencing intrusive images or consistent memories of details relating to the offending.

Maintaining your energy levels, and your feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, is essential to ensure that you can work effectively and preserve your own emotional wellbeing.

Vicarious trauma

If you don't look after yourself when working with distressing and disturbing material, your own wellbeing may deteriorate, leading in some situations to vicarious (or secondary) trauma. There are four important things to know about vicarious trauma:

- Experiencing any form of trauma does not make you weak or unable to do your job. Vicarious trauma can affect many areas of your life and it is important to get support
- It manifests differently in each individual.
- It can occur as a result of exposure to one case, or may be cumulative (with the effect intensifying over time and with multiple clients).
- It is pervasive and can affect all areas of your life including your emotions, relationships and view of the world.

While you may be unlikely to experience vicarious trauma, you may experience 'burnout'. This is a state of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion, and can develop if a person has been under stress for a prolonged period. They feel powerless and may think that there is nothing they can do about their situation or there is no point. Acknowledging that working with sexually abused children can affect your health and wellbeing is the most important first step in preventing it from occurring.

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

Actions you can take

At work, it's important to:

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

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

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

If you have personal experience of being sexually abused, you can:

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



Resources and sources of information

You may find the following organisations and resources helpful in your practice. They include some produced outside the UK which we consider particularly relevant.

Resources for professionals



Organisation	Details
<u>CSA Centre</u> 	A range of <u>practice resources</u>  covering topics such as supporting non-abusing parents and carers, communicating with children, and identifying and recording possible signs and indicators that a child is being sexually abused. Other publications include research reports and <u>summaries of key messages from research</u>  on topics related to child sexual abuse.
<u>Child Trauma Academy</u> 	An extensive <u>library of free resources</u>  relating to child trauma, covering topics such as brain development and interventions.
Nottingham Trent University and University of Huddersfield	A report on <u>the experiences of the partners of people who have committed sexual offences</u>  , including (on page 14) recommendations for professionals seeking to support them.
<u>Children Heard and Seen</u> 	A guide to <u>working with children affected by parental imprisonment</u>  , and understanding and responding to the challenges they face.
<u>Samaritans</u> 	Advice and a template for professionals helping people with suicidal thoughts to <u>develop a safety plan</u>  .

Organisations and resources for non-offending parents

For parents affected by 'the Knock'

Organisation	Details
<u>The Lucy Faithfull Foundation</u> 	The <u>Inform programme</u>  is a course of group sessions for family members and friends of people who have accessed sexual images of children or engaged in other inappropriate sexual behaviours involving children; it enables them to bring their questions and anxieties, and explore them in a supportive environment.
<u>Stop It Now!</u>  (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation)	The <u>Friends and Family Forum</u>  is an online space where non-offending partners can anonymously share experiences, thoughts and knowledge.
<u>Thames Valley Partnership</u> 	Support for the families of offenders who have presented or will be presenting at one of the Thames Valley courts.
<u>Talking Forward</u> 	Peer support for the families of adults who are being or have been investigated for online sexual offences.
<u>Family Rights Group</u> 	Advice for parents and carers about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare.

For parents whose partner is in prison

Organisation	Details
<u>AFFECT</u>  (Action For Families Enduring Criminal Trauma)	Support for people who have, or have had, a family member in prison.
<u>Children Heard and Seen</u> 	Support for families affected by parental imprisonment, including support for the non-offending parent – whether they are still in a relationship with the offending parent or not – around talking to the child(ren) about what has happened and navigating the time around the offending parent's release.

For parents seeking to end their relationship with their partner

Organisation	Details
<u>Women's Aid</u>	Advice for women on <u>ending a relationship safely</u> .

For parents of sexually abused children

Organisation	Details
<u>We Stand</u> (formerly Mosac)	Safe, non-judgemental support for the non-abusing parents and carers of children who have been sexually abused.
<u>The National Child Traumatic Stress Network</u>	Produces a <u>factsheet</u> advising parents and carers on coping with the shock of intrafamilial sexual abuse.
<u>Acts Fast</u>	Support for parents and carers whose children have been sexually abused or exploited, and partners of individuals who have accessed sexual images of children.

Advice on keeping children safe

Organisation	Details
<u>NSPCC</u>	A wide range of advice on keeping children safe online, including <u>when using social media</u> .
<u>Internet Matters</u>	Help for parents to keep their children safe online, including <u>advice to help them navigate the risks and rewards of social media</u> .
<u>Parents Protect</u> (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation)	Advice for parents on protecting their children from sexual abuse, including an <u>online sexual abuse learning programme</u> of short films.
<u>CEOP Education</u> (National Crime Agency)	Advice on <u>helping children to get the most out of the internet</u> , including keeping them safe, acting on concerns and reporting incidents.

Organisations and resources for children

Organisation	Details
<u>Children Heard and Seen</u> 	Support for children affected by parental imprisonment, including one-to-one support for them to explore and understand their emotions, and activity groups where they can meet others in similar circumstances.
<u>Childline</u> 	Information, advice and support for children wanting to talk about any concerns they have.
<u>CEOP Safety Centre</u>  (National Crime Agency)	A resource for children who are worried about online sexual abuse or the way someone has been communicating with them online.

Organisations and resources for offending parents

Organisation	Details
<u>Stop It Now!</u>  (The Lucy Faithfull Foundation)	<u>Support for anyone who is concerned about their own thoughts or behaviour</u> 
<u>StopSO</u> 	A UK-wide independent network of qualified and experienced professionals, trained to work with people who have committed a sexual offence or may be at risk of doing so.
<u>The Lucy Faithfull Foundation</u> 	The <u>Inform Plus programme</u>  offers support to people who have been arrested, cautioned or convicted for internet offences involving child sexual abuse material, to help them stop their behaviour. (The Engage Plus programme does the same for those arrested, cautioned or convicted for sexual communication with children.)
<u>Safer Lives</u> 	Specialist and confidential support during an investigation into online sexual offences.



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