



One minute guide

Child sexual abuse in the family environment

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What is child sexual abuse in the family environment?

[Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2023\)](#) defines child sexual abuse as: 'Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.'

In 2014, the Children's Commissioner undertook an inquiry into child sexual abuse in the family environment. The report, published in November 2015, is called '[Protecting Children from Harm](#)' and defined sexual abuse in the family environment as follows:

'Sexual abuse perpetrated or facilitated in or out of the home, against a child under the age of 18, by a family member, or someone otherwise linked to the family context or environment, whether or not they are a family member. Within this definition, perpetrators may be close to the victim (e.g. father, uncle, and stepfather) or less familiar (e.g. family friend, babysitter).' Perpetrators can also be female, such as mother, aunt or stepmother.

Some of the findings from the report include:

- The estimated proportion of children that suffer sexual abuse is about 11%;
- Two thirds of child sexual abuse takes place within the family environment or the close circle around it;
- Only one in eight children in England who are sexually abused come to the attention of statutory authorities;
- Children often do not recognise that they have been abused until they are older;
- Practitioners working with children need additional support to help them identify victims of sexual abuse; and
- Child sexual abuse in the family environment often comes to the attention of statutory and non-statutory agencies as a result of a secondary presenting factor, for example self-harm, which becomes the focus of intervention. The underlying issue of child sexual abuse may not be identified.

How should disclosures from children be handled?

If a child discloses that they have been sexually abused, the initial response should be to listen carefully to what the child says, and to observe their behaviour and circumstances. Practitioners must: clarify the concerns; offer reassurance about how the child will be kept safe; and explain what action needs to be taken and within what timeframe. **The child must not be pressed for information, led or cross-examined or given false assurances of absolute confidentiality, as this could prejudice police investigations.** Practitioners should follow their agency safeguarding policy and procedures in relation to contacting Duty and Advice, seeking advice from safeguarding leads as required. Care must be taken when considering parental consent.

How can child sexual abuse in the family environment be identified?

Practitioners should not expect that a disclosure will always be made. Sexual abuse which takes place within family environments often remains hidden and can be the most difficult type of abuse for children and young people to disclose. Many do not initially recognise themselves as victims of sexual abuse. They may not understand what is happening or even that it is wrong; especially as the perpetrator may seek to reduce the risk of disclosure by normalising the behaviour, threatening the child, telling them they will not be believed or blaming them in some way for their own abuse.

Children who are sexually abused may exhibit a range of signs but any one sign in isolation doesn't necessarily mean that a child is being sexually abused. Where a number of signs are identified, the possibility of sexual abuse should be considered and practitioners should consult with others who know the child to see whether they also have concerns. Signs include the following - though this list is not exhaustive:

- Changes in behaviour, including becoming more anxious, aggressive, withdrawn, or clingy;
- Problems in school, difficulty concentrating, drop-off in academic performance;
- Sleep problems or regressed behaviours i.e. bed wetting;
- Being frightened of or seeking to avoid spending time with a particular person;
- Knowledge of and/ or interest in sexual behaviour or language that is inappropriate for their age;
- Children who behave sexually or play sexual games (may display inappropriate sexual behaviour towards others, and sometimes during play)
- Physical symptoms including pregnancy (particularly where the identity of the father is vague or secret), STIs, discharge or unexplained bleeding;
- Poor hygiene;
- Injuries and bruises on parts of the body where other explanations are not available especially bruises, bite marks or other injuries to breasts, buttocks, lower abdomen or thighs;
- Soreness in genital/ anal areas; and
- Injuries to the mouth, which may be noted by dental practitioners.

In the long term, people who have been sexually abused are more likely to suffer with [depression](#), [anxiety](#), [eating disorders](#) and [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#). They are also more likely to self-harm, become involved in criminal behaviour, misuse drugs and alcohol and to attempt or die by suicide as young adults.

Key contacts and further information

Where practitioners believe that a child is at risk of or experiencing sexual abuse, they should contact [Duty and Advice](#) on tel: 0113 3760336. If a child is at immediate risk of harm the Police should be contacted on 999.

More information is available from the [West Yorkshire Consortium Online Safeguarding Children Procedures](#).

You can also read:

- [Key messages from research on intra-familial sexual abuse](#);
- [Preventing child sexual abuse—the role of schools](#);
- [Sexual abuse and therapeutic services for children and young people](#);
- [Making noise: Children's voices for change after sexual abuse](#);
- [Protecting Children from Harm](#);
- [Sibling sexual abuse and behaviour - practice resources](#); and
- [National review of child sexual abuse within the family environment](#).