

# An initial child protection conference is held

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## 1. Who is this document for?

This document is aimed principally at professionals attending an initial child protection conference in a case involving concerns about child sexual abuse. It explains how *all* these professionals can best help the child<sup>1</sup> before and during the conference; sections 5 and 6 contain information specifically for the social worker assigned to the case and the chair of the conference.

It is also relevant to other professionals working with the child, helping them understand what will happen at an initial child protection conference.

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<sup>1</sup> In this document we use the term ‘child’ to refer to anyone under the age of 18. See [An introduction to the child sexual abuse response pathway](#) for more about terminology.

## 2. What is an initial child protection conference?

When a child protection enquiry has found that a child is suffering or is at risk of **significant harm**, an initial child protection conference (referred to as 'the conference' from here on) will be convened. The child's family and any other agency can also ask for a conference to be convened.

The conference should take place within **15 working days** of the multi-agency strategy discussion that launched the child protection enquiry. Chaired by a senior social work manager, it brings together all those concerned in protecting the child:

- the child themselves (where appropriate)
- non-abusing<sup>2</sup> members of their family (where appropriate)
- the child's supporter/advocate
- the professionals who are most involved with the child and their family. In addition to the social worker and the police officer in the case, these may include the child's teacher and the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead, the child's health visitor/GP and any other health professionals who have examined them, and others who have specialist information about or knowledge of them; if concerns were raised with children's social care or the police by a professional who is not listed above, they too will typically attend.

It is best practice for the child to be invited to the conference if they have sufficient understanding, and for them to be provided with an advocate and/or someone to support them. The chair of the child protection meeting will always meet with the child beforehand and so can address any feelings, worries or concerns.

Each local authority will have its own approach to managing the conference, sharing and analysing information, and agreeing next steps. Nevertheless, all conferences have the same purposes and goals:

- To share and evaluate information between agencies about the child's health, development and wellbeing, and their family history.
- To assess whether the child has been significantly harmed or is at continued risk of being harmed, and the needs of the child and their family.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'non-abusing' to mean a family member who is *not considered to have been involved in sexually abusing the child*, even if they may have previously come to agencies' attention for other reasons.

- To assess the capacity of the child's non-abusing parent(s)<sup>3</sup> to ensure the child's safety and promote their wellbeing.
- To decide whether a child protection plan should be put in place.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. How may the child be feeling?

The child may experience a range of emotions when they know a child protection conference is being held. They may feel afraid, under pressure, embarrassed or ashamed at the prospect of talking about their experiences – and if sexual images of them have been discovered, they will worry about who may have seen these.

Remember that they may feel responsible for distress caused to their family, or feel blamed by their family for involving the authorities; these emotions may be particularly strong in cases of suspected sexual behaviour by a sibling. They may continue to feel they have done something wrong.

Alternatively, they may not think they are being abused or at risk of abuse (if they are being sexually exploited or groomed online, for example).

If the child attends the conference but without any support, they may feel overwhelmed or intimidated being in a room with many professionals who all have something to say. They may be distressed if they cannot understand everything that is happening, and may find it difficult to speak up and express their thoughts and feelings.

Having someone they feel comfortable with to explain things, to voice their wellbeing needs and to take notes, is likely to be helpful.

*“The chairlady, she was like the boss of the whole thing she was like, she said if I wanted to contribute to anything and that if I had views then say them.” (1)*

*“[My social worker] was really helpful because she wrote stuff down that I actually did say and read it back to me and said it at the meetings.” (1)*

*“Every time I went to speak [in the meeting], someone interrupted me and that really annoyed me so I was like right I’m going, I’ve got to get to school.” (1)*

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<sup>3</sup> By 'parent' we mean someone in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child; this may be their biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative fulfilling that role.

<sup>4</sup> This is the terminology used in England; in Wales the conference will decide whether to place the child on the **child protection register**, and the plan put in place for them is called the **care and support protection plan**. The process is the same in both nations. For the sake of simplicity, this document adopts the terminology used in England.

*“I didn’t lie but there was a sense of awkwardness when you know you should say something but you don’t want to say it in front of certain people.” (1)*

*“You are involved with the process but you have no control over the outcome.” (2)*

*“You just sit there and agree with everything, don’t really say much but I think it’s a bit of a waste of time.” (1)*

*“I think it can be a bit, the questions that they ask, well if I answer them then I am going to like upset you know my mum.” (1)*

*“It was like pretty big words so I asked what they were ... and then we all went round the table and it was like a vote whether I should still have a child protection overtake or whether I shouldn’t and I think I was the only, I can’t remember whether mum said yes or no but I was the first person who said erm no I shouldn’t have one but everyone voted yes.” (1)*

If the child chooses not to attend the conference, they may later regret not having been part of the decision-making – and if they are not invited to attend, they are likely to feel resentful.

*“I’d like to have gone. I don’t know what they said.” (3)*

Remember that, alongside the child protection process, there is much you can do to support the child’s wellbeing. Our practice guides can help you think about the support you can provide around:

- their [emotional health and wellbeing](#)
- their [education](#)
- their [physical health](#)
- their [relationships with family and friends](#).

## 4. How can all professionals best help the child when preparing reports for the conference?

The conference will rely on good-quality information from all the professionals involved. *Whatever your profession*, if you will be sharing information at the conference you should:

- **tell the child** and the non-abusing parent(s) before the day of the conference what information you will be sharing, unless telling them would be unsafe and put the child at risk

- report your understanding of **what the child and the parent(s) want** from the conference, including points of agreement or disagreement within the family. It is important that the child feels their circumstances are accurately reflected.

### **a) Social worker's report**

If you are the social worker assigned to the case, your report for the conference will usually be your child protection enquiry/assessment report. (See our practice guide [Children's social care lead a child protection enquiry](#).) Ensure that this clearly states the concerns about the child, including concerns about sexual abuse; specifically, it should **clearly name sexual abuse as a concern** (even if you are more certain that other forms of abuse or neglect have occurred or may occur) and detail **who might pose a risk of sexual harm** and in what contexts harm to the child may increase, if known.

The report should build a holistic picture of the child and the risk of sexual abuse, covering the issues below. Across all the following themes you may find it helpful to use our [Signs and Indicators Template](#).

#### **Considerations relating to the child**

- The child's **individual circumstances**. Do they have a disability or learning difficulty? What is their ethnicity, their cultural and socio-economic background, their sexual orientation, etc.? What is their communication style?
- **What the child has said** about what has happened. Remember to take account of the difficulty they may have in talking about sexual abuse.
- Any **signs and indicators** of sexual abuse that have been observed.
- Any known **impacts** of the sexual abuse on the child, and action proposed to address this.
- **Dual needs**: in cases where a child has been sexually harmed by a sibling, your report should address the needs of all children, and consider any continuing risk posed by the child(ren) who has harmed.

#### **The family circumstances**

- **Demographic information** about the parent(s), including their ethnicity, religion, culture and language.
- Any known **disruption to family dynamics and relationships**, particularly between the non-abusing parent and the child, caused by the sexual abuse.
- Other relevant issues in the family which may **increase pressure on the non-abusing parent(s)** and reduce their capacity to protect the child. These could include domestic abuse and/or parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and social isolation, disabilities, and having been sexually abused themselves.

- How the non-abusing parent(s) **understand the sexual abuse concerns** that have been raised. Bear in mind that the trauma of learning about child sexual abuse can affect their understanding of and reaction to what is happening.

### Concerns about people around the child

- **Signs and indicators of sexually abusive behaviour** such as grooming, threats, coercion, control, and activity seeking to isolate or befriend the child. This behaviour may be displayed by a child or an adult, in either the home environment or an institutional setting (school, faith group, sports club, etc.).
- Analysis of the **role of the person of concern**, if they are an adult in the home environment. Have they gradually taken over parenting tasks, undermined another parent's self-esteem and parenting ability, and/or presented themselves as the more proficient parent? Are there indications that they are grooming professionals?
- Any concerns about **sexual boundaries** in the home, including privacy for children. Comment on any exposure of children to adult sexual activity, pornography and/or inappropriate nudity.
- Information from any **mapping exercise or similar** carried out if the concerns are about *extra-familial* sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviour. This should identify any networks, consider how abusive behaviours might be disrupted, what additional safeguarding may be needed for any other children or vulnerable adults, and assess any risks to the child and their family from telling professionals about the abuse/harmful behaviour.

### b) Medical report

If the child has had a paediatric medical examination, or any other health tests/check-ups in connection with the suspected sexual abuse, the medical professional(s) involved should provide a report to the conference. The report should also detail any health, emotional or medical needs of the child, including the need for:

- further assessments of the child's physical or emotional health and wellbeing
- the collection of forensic evidence by the police.

Remember that if the medical examination has not found evidence of sexual harm, this does not mean the child has not been abused – finding medical evidence of sexual harm is rare.

### c) Police report

As the police officer in the case, you should provide information about any adults of concern in the child's life, and any previous concerns of sexual abuse or

abusive behaviours relating to those adults and/or the child. Your report should also outline:

- any current police investigations
- plans to interview the child formally, if this has not happened already, and any measures to ensure that they are supported through this
- information about any action being taken to:
  - disrupt the activity of adults suspected of sexually abusing the child (see the Home Office's [child exploitation disruption toolkit](#))
  - assess any ongoing risks posed to the child by other children suspected of harmful sexual behaviour, and identify those children's own needs.

#### ***d) Other professionals' reports***

If you are invited to provide the conference with a report setting out your knowledge of the child and their family, your report should focus on what you or your agency knows of:

- any possible signs and indicators (in the child themselves, or in the people around them) that the child is being sexually abused or at risk of sexual abuse – you may find our [Signs and Indicators Template](#) helpful
- how the possible sexual abuse may have affected the child
- any family vulnerabilities, and how these might undermine the non-abusing parent(s)' protective ability and increase the likelihood of grooming/coercion.

## **5. How can the child's social worker best help them before the conference?**

Before the initial child protection case conference, speak with the child (if they are capable of understanding) and their non-abusing parent(s) to:

- tell them that the conference is happening, and explain what this means in child-centred and developmentally appropriate language
- tell them what reports will be presented to and discussed at the conference
- tell them that they can provide some written information to the conference
- invite them to attend the conference – it is always good practice to invite the child unless this is inappropriate for their age and stage of development
- ensure that they know the child can bring an advocate – such as an independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) or a child and young person's

sexual violence advocate (CYPSVA/CHISVA) – or someone else to support them

- ask them whether they think any other professionals should attend – they may identify people, such as a youth worker or a school pastoral care worker, which the conference chair hasn't
- help the child prepare for the conference, if they are attending
- ensure that the child has an opportunity to share their views, wishes and feelings if they are *not* attending – by writing these down, for example, or recording them in a video. As the child's social worker, you can also share the child's views on their behalf, or their advocate can do so.

It is important to reassure and remind the child that they did the right thing by asking professionals for help. Their parents and wider family will need to be reminded that the decision to hold the conference has been based on the results of the child protection enquiry, not just what the child has said. If necessary, address any blame they are attaching to the child.

If there is a good reason for another professional to have this conversation with the child, arrange for this to happen – but note that multiple professionals shouldn't be asking the child the same questions.

When the conference takes place, it will be important to know:

- what help and support the child wants at this stage
- what they hope will happen next and in the future.

Bear in mind, however, that the conference may need to take actions or make decisions that go against what the child says they want. It is important that the child is helped to understand this.

If the child or their parent(s) have any communication needs – because they have disabilities and/or English is not their first language, for example – ensure that arrangements have been made so they can express themselves and understand what is happening during the conference. This will typically be done by the child's advocate, but you will need to brief them.

## 6. How can the conference chair best help the child before the conference?

If the child, their non-abusing parent(s) and/or their advocate/supporter will be attending the conference, you as the conference chair have a responsibility to meet with them before the conference starts.

Satisfy yourself that any necessary arrangements have been made so that the child and their parent(s) can express themselves and know what is going on during the conference, taking account of disabilities and language barriers. If you have any concerns about this, talk to the child's social worker. Even with such arrangements in place, however, bear in mind that the child may not want to talk about their experiences of sexual abuse, or anything related to them, during the conference.

Review everything that is being presented in relation to the sexual abuse concerns, so that appropriate plans can be made in the conference. Think about how any support provided will meet the child's individual needs, focusing on topics such as:

- **the child's expectations** – what do they want and expect from professionals' involvement?
- any specific needs relating to **disabilities, learning difficulties, social and behavioural difficulties** and//or **language barriers**
- the child's other characteristics – think about what the concerns of sexual abuse may mean in the context of the **ethnicity, religion** and **culture** of the child and their family, and the child's **sexual orientation** or **gender identity**. Also bear in mind that the child may not want to talk to or trust professionals if they or their family have experienced prejudice, discrimination or unconscious bias.

Where there are concerns that a parent/parent figure or other adult family member may have abused the child, it is **not** appropriate for them to attend the conference. Think about what message the child would receive if this adult did attend; how the adult might use the information shared; and how it might act as professional validation of their actions, which they could use to facilitate further grooming, coercion and control. Agree with the social worker other ways that the adult of concern can provide information and receive feedback.

## 7. How can all professionals best help the child during the conference?

In cases involving concerns about child sexual abuse, the initial child protection conference provides an opportunity to consider and weigh up all the available information – and, based on this, to analyse the likelihood of (further) sexual abuse, being clear about who might pose a sexual risk to the child and why.

The conference can also consider wellbeing support for the child and their non-abusing parent(s), and it will develop a plan to keep the child – and any other children involved – safe. Other topics for discussion include:

- the progress of any police investigation, and the pooling of all available information to help build a case
- how the child and their family can be supported to provide evidence as part of any police investigation – if the child says they would like to provide written information rather than an interview, for example, or that they need time to think about it, do not interpret this as meaning necessarily that they *never* want to speak to the police.
- the use of civil orders (such as sexual risk orders) by the police to provide some protection to the child and disrupt abuse.

### ***Listen to the child***

During the conference, you will be able to hear what the child wants to happen, either directly from them (in person or having had their views recorded in writing or on video) or via their social worker or advocate/supporter. It's important to be prepared to challenge your thinking about what is best for the child.

When considering what the child has – and has not – said, bear in mind that the child may be reluctant to talk about certain things if their parent(s) are also in the room. (You may feel the same; see below.)

### ***Maintain a focus on child sexual abuse***

There may still be uncertainty about whether the child has been sexually abused, or is at risk of sexual abuse. Possible reasons for this include:

- Child sexual abuse is often not recognised – and even when it is, professionals tend to focus on other concerns which seem easier to identify, such as neglect and physical abuse.
- The child may not have made a clear statement about what has happened or is happening to them, perhaps because they did not feel able to talk about the abuse they have experienced.
- The police may have decided there is not enough evidence 'beyond reasonable doubt' for them to take action at this time.
- Non-abusing adults around the child may have rejected any concerns raised, because they cannot believe that the child may have been sexually abused.
- Professionals may find it difficult to talk about sexual abuse, particularly in front of family members during the conference; this may happen even if the original concern raised was about sexual abuse.

It is important that the concern about sexual abuse does not get lost in these circumstances: sexual abuse must always be addressed directly, and clearly

named as a concern. You **do not need** the police to take further action in order for a plan of action to safeguard and support the child to be made.

### ***Consider the context of the child sexual abuse concerns***

#### **Sexual abuse by a parent or other adult in the family network**

Where there are concerns that an adult in the family may have sexually abused the child, your assessment must consider whether there remains any opportunity for further grooming or abuse of the child or other children in the family.

Abuse by an adult in the family network can be particularly traumatic because it involves high levels of betrayal, stigma and secrecy. The non-abusing parent(s) may feel guilt and self-blame, be coming to terms with the loss from their life of their partner or other close family member, and have become separated from other family members.

Consider whether the non-abusing parent(s) are acting in a protective way to keep the child safe, and will continue to do so. How can professionals support them so that the child is kept safe and feels believed and validated?

In situations where an adult in the family has downloaded child sexual abuse imagery or other material, you may find it useful to consult our guide [Managing Risk and Trauma after Online Sexual Offending](#); this explains how learning about the offence may affect the child(ren) and other family members, and provides information about risk and safety planning.

#### **Harmful sexual behaviour by a sibling**

If the child has been sexually harmed by a sibling, you will need to consider the needs of both children, treating them both with care and respect. Consider the following questions:

- Is continued contact between the children in the best interests of the child who has been harmed?
- Can that contact be emotionally and practically safe?
- Will the child who has harmed need to be moved?
- Can a safety plan be put in place while further enquiries and investigations take place?

You can find more information in our [guide to assessing and responding to sibling sexual behaviour](#).

Sexual harm by a sibling can have huge emotional and physical impact on the child who has been harmed. The sibling who has harmed will also need safeguarding and support to address their behaviour and other emerging needs;

bear in mind that they too are a child, and may themselves be a victim of abuse or neglect.

Their parent(s) and other family members are likely to have found it particularly traumatic to deal with the harm that has taken place between siblings. This will impact them and their family relationships.

The risk that the child who has harmed may pose to *other* children must also be considered; this may mean recommending a specialist assessment, or an assessment using your local harmful sexual behaviour pathway.

### Extra-familial sexual abuse

Where there are concerns that the child has been sexually abused outside the family environment, including online, it's important to address these questions:

- Where does the child spend their time (including online spaces)? What is known about these places? Should attention be given to making certain locations safer for children and young people generally?
- How does the child relate to their school and local community? What is the school environment like for them?
- Is social media important to them?
- Who do they spend time with? What peer networks do they have, and are any of these networks worrying? How does the child's situation compare with that of others in their peer group?
- Do they know any adults in the communities where they spend time? Are there any adults of concern – and if so, what is known about these adults and what action has been taken to disrupt their activity? (It may be useful to look at the Home Office's [Child exploitation disruption toolkit](#).) Which adults outside the family reach into or have responsibility over parts of the child's life, and should be spoken to as part of a child protection enquiry?

Assess these extra-familial elements alongside, or in relation to, the parent(s)' influence on and/or ability to care for and protect the child.

Consider too whether there are factors in the family home, such as neglect, domestic abuse or physical/emotional abuse, which contribute to negative issues or influences outside the home– and whether the non-abusing parent(s) themselves may be being groomed, coerced or controlled by the person thought to be abusing their child.

Bear in mind that the child may also be subject to **criminal exploitation**; this often happens in cases of extra-familial child sexual abuse.

If the child is living outside the family home, appropriate contact arrangements will need to be developed. How can the child continue to feel part of the family?

Many children who have been **sexually abused in online contexts** feel that they do not get the level of support they need, and that professionals and family members do not recognise the abuse's impact. The child may feel that they are to blame because their presence online means they participated in the abuse; if you are talking to them about what has happened, ask them about their use of technology so you can understand it from their perspective, while being careful not to be judgemental or victim-blaming. Show them that you are taking the abuse seriously, and do not use phrases such as 'the real world' and 'the online world': recognise that both are parts of the child's social and emotional life.

You may lack confidence in talking about what has happened because you feel the child is more 'expert' in technology than you are – remember, the skills you require – relationship-based practice, talking to children and accepting what they tell you – are those that enable an effective response to *any* form of child abuse.

### If the abused child has themselves engaged in harmful sexual behaviour

If there are concerns that the child may also have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour, it is still important to ensure that they are supported and safeguarded: they need appropriate services and support to address both their own needs and any risks they may present to others.

## 8. Concluding/after the conference

The initial child protection conference will conclude with an inter-agency agreement on whether the child should be made the subject of a **child protection plan** under a specific category or categories of harm:

- If the child is to be placed on a child protection plan, the outline plan will be discussed at the conference and a **core group** will then be convened. More detailed work will be completed at the first core group meeting, and the plan will be regularly reviewed both at core group meetings and in the review child protection conference.
- There can be a reluctance to place children on plans under the category of sexual abuse because it is felt that there is not enough 'evidence' of sexual abuse to do so. Remember that **the legal threshold for safeguarding is 'the balance of probabilities'**, not 'beyond reasonable doubt' and so if there is evidence that a child has, on the balance of probabilities, been sexually abused they should be registered as such. When these concerns are present, but children are registered under another category (most commonly neglect or

emotional abuse), recommendations tend not to focus on sexual abuse, maintaining silence on the issue.

- Even if the child has not been made the subject of a plan under the category of child sexual abuse, the core group should still address any sexual abuse concerns.
- If it is decided that the child is no longer at risk of harm because of action that has already been taken, they may be supported through a **child in need plan**<sup>5</sup> or an **early help response** may be considered. On rare occasions, it may be decided that there should be **no further support from children's social care**.

All professionals should remember that this can be a scary time for the child and their family, who need to understand what is happening and why:

- If the child and their non-abusing parent(s) were not present, the social worker should tell them the outcome of the conference.
- If they were present at the conference, the social worker should give them and other family members an opportunity afterwards to talk about what was discussed and decided.

The social worker should also think carefully about what information to share with a family member about whom there are sexual abuse concerns.

## 9. Where next?

- [The child is supported through a child protection plan.](#)
- [An early help response is proposed.](#)
- [When children's social care decide their involvement is no longer needed.](#)

Or [return to the response pathway](#).

### Sources of quotations

The quotations in this practice guide, from children who have received support from children's social care, illustrate how the child may be feeling at this point and how your actions can make a difference:

- (1) Cossar, J., Brandon, M. and Jordan, P. (2011) ['Don't Make Assumptions': Children's and Young People's Views of the Child Protection System and Messages for Change](#). London: Office of the Children's Commissioner.
- (2) Buckley, H., Carr, N. and Whelan, S. (2011) ['Like walking on eggshells': service user views and expectations of the child protection system](#). *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(1):101–110.

<sup>5</sup> 'Child in need plan' is the term used in England; in Wales, it is called a care and support plan.

- (3) Bell, M. (2002) [Promoting children's rights through the use of relationship](#). *Child & Family Social Work*, 7(1):1–11.

*Procedures to be followed in cases of child abuse are set out in the UK Government's statutory guidance for England, [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) (2026) and in the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#) (2020).*

*This practice guide outlines specific considerations when there are concerns of child **sexual** abuse. It is underpinned by the above documents, and is not intended to repeat or replace them. It should be read alongside your local child protection procedures.*

*This guide is part of our [child sexual abuse response pathway](#), designed to ensure that professional responses to concerns about child sexual abuse meet the needs of children and their families. It aims to bring clarity to key response points, helping you keep the child's needs and perspectives central.*