



An introduction to the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway

- What is the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway? 2
- What are the key principles of the Response Pathway? 2
- Who is the Response Pathway for? 3
- Why is the Response Pathway needed?..... 4
- How was the Response Pathway developed? 6
- How does the Response Pathway work? 7
- How does the Response Pathway take account of different forms of child sexual abuse? 7
- How does the Response Pathway take account of diversity? 8
- How does the Response Pathway consider the needs of non-abusing parents?... 8
- Terminology used in the Response Pathway 10
- Additional resources from the CSA Centre 10

What is the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway?

Developed by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre), and piloted with safeguarding partnerships and local authorities, the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway highlights good practice when there are concerns that a child¹ is being or has been sexually abused. It aims to bring clarity to professionals' responsibilities and actions at key points, so that children about whom there are concerns of sexual abuse are protected and supported, and their wider wellbeing is addressed.

The Response Pathway outlines clearly the process to follow and the actions required to respond to children if sexual abuse is a concern. It has three main aims:

- **Make the needs and perspectives of children central** in professionals' responses to child sexual abuse.
- **Bring clarity to key response points** so that professionals' responses to child sexual abuse meet the needs of children who are being or have been sexually abused, and the needs of their families.
- **Improve professionals' responses to child sexual abuse** by providing a pathway that is grounded in evidence and good practice.

What are the key principles of the Response Pathway?

The Response Pathway aims to supplement, not to replace, statutory guidance. It is therefore grounded in the principles of [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) (2026) and the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#) (2025), as well as various government, police and Crown Prosecution Service guidelines.

The Response Pathway is underpinned by the fundamental needs of children who have been sexually abused (see next page). These needs were drawn from research carried out at the University of Bedfordshire, published in [Making Noise: Children's Voices for Positive Change after Sexual Abuse](#) (2017), and further developed through our own consultation with children.

¹ Throughout the Response Pathway, we use the term 'child' to mean anyone under the age of 18. For more information, see the [Terminology](#) section.



At all stages of the Response Pathway, we ask professionals to find out what the child wants so that they understand:

- what help and support the child is looking for at that point
- what the child hopes will happen next and in the future.

The Response Pathway also reminds professionals that the child's safety and wellbeing is paramount.

Who is the Response Pathway for?

The Response Pathway is for all professionals whose roles brings them into contact with children and their families when there may be concerns or reports that a child is being or has been sexually abused. It is therefore particularly relevant to social workers, education staff, police officers, health staff, youth justice and the community and voluntary sector who work with children and families.

The Response Pathway supports professionals to respond to children who are being or have been sexually abused. The Response Pathway does not cover the response to adult survivors of sexual abuse, nor the response to adults who are known or suspected to have sexually abused children. Advice and guidance where children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour is included.

Why is the Response Pathway needed?

There are far more children being sexually abused than are currently being identified and safeguarded. Our 2021 report [The Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Evidence](#) showed that:

- The scale of child sexual abuse is difficult to measure because of its hidden nature: all available evidence is likely to underestimate the reality. Based on surveys conducted in England and Wales, the CSA Centre estimates that at least one in 10 children in England and Wales is sexually abused before the age of 16. This figure would probably be much higher if sexual abuse in online contexts was included. Among children who are sexually abused, fewer than one in eight come to the attention of any professional at the time of the abuse, leading to a significant under-identification of child sexual abuse and a delayed response to victims
- Girls are around three times more likely than boys to be sexually abused. Additionally, boys are less likely than girls to tell anyone about their abuse, meaning that the sexual abuse of boys is much less likely to come to the attention of professionals.
- The number of child protection plans/registrations in England and Wales has been decreasing for many years, and currently, sexual abuse makes up just 3.5% of plans/registrations. This is at its lowest level since records began, nearly 30 years ago.

We have identified four key issues which we believe underpin the challenges faced by services seeking to identify and respond effectively to child sexual abuse:

- **Professionals working with children have been insufficiently supported to gain the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to identify and respond effectively to concerns that a child is being sexually abused.** There has been a longstanding inconsistency in the availability, accessibility, breadth and quality of training on child sexual abuse; this is also the case for peer support and supervision in social work, health, education, policing, youth justice, and the community / voluntary sector. Supervision is a critical component of working effectively to address child sexual abuse. You may want to look at [Using supervision and team meetings](#), which is a guide to help supervisors and managers kickstart discussions about improving responses to child sexual abuse.
- **The criminal justice system alone is rarely an effective means of protection, and too great a focus on it can divert focus away from the safeguarding and welfare needs of the child.** The vast majority of police investigations into child sexual abuse do not progress to charge and

prosecution or out-of-court resolution. Although the number of cases of child sexual abuse that progress through the criminal justice system is very low, fear of ‘contaminating evidence’ often inhibits professionals from identifying and responding effectively to abuse.

- **Professionals tend to rely on the criminal justice system as a means of assessing whether abuse has occurred, and this often becomes the primary focus of intervention.** It is important to be clear that safeguarding actions by children’s social care and other professionals are *not* dependent on a criminal justice response or outcome. Too often, cases are closed if the criminal justice system does not proceed with an investigation or prosecution (which can happen for a number of reasons), leaving children unsupported.
- **There is no clearly articulated safeguarding pathway or guidance in the context of child sexual abuse concerns.** Although legislation and statutory guidance such as [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) (2026), the [Children Act 1989](#) and the Welsh Government’s [Safeguarding Procedures](#) provide the generic safeguarding and child protection pathway to be followed in response to concerns of child abuse, this does not provide sufficient detail or advice specific to child sexual abuse.

In November 2024, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published its national review into child sexual abuse in the family environment. This [national review](#) found systemic failings across all agencies to identify and respond to this form of harm.

Four areas of practice required improvement:

Not hearing children’s voices or understanding their needs. The review found an overreliance on children to report their abuse verbally; professionals often waited for children to come forward, rather than proactively talking to children about concerns about child sexual abuse. There remains confusion about what can and cannot be said to children, and when children did speak out, they were often not believed, and subsequent retractions taken as proof that the abuse had not occurred. Children’s needs related to ethnicity and disability were not always addressed, and the significant impact of child sexual abuse on children’s lives was not recognised or sufficiently responded to.

Understanding parents’ and carers’ context vulnerabilities and needs. The review found that there was a poor understanding of concerns about domestic abuse and learning disabilities, what this meant for parents and what support was needed. In many situations, there was an unrealistic over-reliance on non-abusing parents to protect children without support or appropriate safety planning being in place.

Challenges in identifying signs, understanding risk and raising concerns.

Practitioners across all agencies were not routinely identifying or acting on signs of sexual abuse, wanting there to be an alternative explanation. This was particularly apparent for disabled children. There was a lack of recognition of the risk posed by adult family members with convictions for sexual offences and prosecutions for sexual abuse, and a poor understanding of grooming and coercive control. There were gaps across agencies in information sharing about sexual offending, and concerns about adults who posed a risk of sexual harm were not always understood or addressed. There was confusion about the guidance regarding consent and information sharing, which often led to a lack of action.

Issues in responding to concerns of intrafamilial child sexual abuse.

The review found that strategy discussions were often poorly planned, did not focus on a child's individual needs and circumstances and did not always include the right people; specialist health and probation colleagues were often not invited. Joint police/social work investigations were often poorly planned and executed. There was confusion around thresholds, and when police investigations ended due to evidential difficulties, other professionals interpreted this as meaning that the child had not been sexually abused. The report recommended a change in language from 'no further action' to 'no further police action at this time' and the requirement for a follow-up strategy discussion to be held when the police close an investigation, with all agencies present, to consider what other safeguarding action and support is required.

This national review has highlighted the lack of confidence across the safeguarding workforce, the fear of getting it wrong, and uncertainty about what good practice looks like. The Response Pathway aims to address this.

How was the Response Pathway developed?

Led by our team of researchers and practice improvement advisers, we have taken an evidence-informed approach to developing the Response Pathway:

- **We commissioned** an initial scoping review to establish the need for the Response Pathway.
- **We set up a reference group** of professionals from the statutory and voluntary sectors to guide the Resource Pathway's development.
- **We mapped** existing pathways, guidance and literature.
- **We drafted** an initial Response Pathway map, a set of practice guides and accompanying resources (detailed below).

- **We consulted** people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and professionals in a range of sectors and roles, and **further refined** the Response Pathway map, practice guides and resources based on their feedback.
- **We piloted** the Response Pathway, working with three local partnership areas which were interested in implementing it across their multi-agency workforces.
- **We have supported** a number of regions to implement the Response Pathway and have produced an implementation guide for other areas wishing to do the same.

How does the Response Pathway work?

The Response Pathway is a semi-interactive online resource with advice and guidance for key decisions in the professional response to a child about whom there are concerns of sexual abuse. Each 'decision point' is linked to a **practice guide** which will help professionals keep the child's needs foremost in their response.

The practice guides include direct quotes from research carried out with children, and with adults who were sexually abused in childhood, to illustrate how the child may be feeling at each point in the professional response.

How does the Response Pathway take account of different forms of child sexual abuse?

The Response Pathway focuses on all forms of child sexual abuse, although we have provided guidance in relation to specific forms of sexual abuse where this seems most needed – for example:

- intra-familial sexual abuse
- harmful sexual behaviour by children, including siblings
- extra-familial sexual abuse
- sexual abuse in online contexts, including abuse related to imagery.
- Child sexual abuse in the context of child sexual exploitation

The protection and support a child is likely to require will depend on the context(s) in which they may have been sexually abused: factors such as whether the abuse has taken place inside and/or outside the family environment, and who has

abused the child. For example, sexual abuse by a parent,² harmful sexual behaviour by a sibling, harmful sexual behaviour by another child at school, sexual exploitation by a group, and a parent's viewing of sexual images of children (including videos or livestreams) will all require different approaches to safeguarding and support.

How does the Response Pathway take account of diversity?

Wherever possible, the Response Pathway seeks to highlight ways in which professionals can take account of diversity by:

- **challenging** their own thinking
- **taking active steps** to identify and overcome barriers
- **being sensitive** to the needs of the individual child and their family, bearing in mind that every child is different and will require an individual response
- Highlighting the importance of **naming discrimination and racism**, checking biases and responding appropriately

We strongly recommend that you read our guide to [Taking account of diversity](#), which aims to help professionals address all aspects of diversity in relation to child sexual abuse and their response to it. The [Barnardo's SEEN project](#) whose mission it is to create systemic change by challenging structural inequalities that impede opportunities for a fair and equitable future for children and young people of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage hosts a number of additional useful resources.

How does the Response Pathway consider the needs of non-abusing parents?

The Response Pathway focuses on helping professionals to consider and respond to the needs of a child who is, or may have been, sexually abused. This includes communicating with and involving the child's non-abusing³ parent(s) or carers, as well as thinking about their support needs – particularly when these parents or carers may also be victims/survivors of domestic abuse, have

² Throughout the Response Pathway, we use the term 'parent' to mean anyone in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child. For more information, see the [Terminology](#) section.

³ By 'non-abusing', we mean a parent 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.

substance misuse issues or experience mental health difficulties. Our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#) is an in-depth resource to assist professionals in working with non-abusing parents and carers.

The Response Pathway also recognises that a different response to parents is needed when there are concerns that an adult in a parenting role is sexually abusing a child. It reminds professionals that the child's safety and welfare should always be paramount.

Terminology used in the Response Pathway

For the sake of simplicity, we use the term ‘**child**’ to refer to anyone under the age of 18. It is important, however, to remember that teenagers as well as younger children can be sexually abused.

We use the term ‘**parent**’ to encompass any parent or carer in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child; this may be, for example, the child’s biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative in that role.

As far as possible, we avoid using the abbreviation ‘CSA’ or talking about children having ‘experienced child sexual abuse’, as we believe these ways of referring to child sexual abuse and being sexually abused can serve to obscure the lived experience of victims/survivors.

We also avoid terms that are sometimes understood differently or that feel uncomfortable for some people:

- We talk about ‘the person who has, or may have, sexually abused the child’ rather than the ‘perpetrator’, ‘sex offender’ or ‘paedophile’.
- We refer to ‘harmful sexual behaviour’ rather than ‘peer-on-peer abuse’ or ‘peer-perpetrated abuse’.
- Instead of ‘disclosing abuse’, we refer to telling someone (although we recognise that this may involve verbal and/or non-verbal communication) or reporting abuse.

Additional resources

Based on the early experiences of three diverse areas that have been piloting the Response Pathway across their multi-agency workforce, our publication [Starting Out on the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway: A Guide for Local Partnerships](#) contains valuable advice on beginning the implementation process.

It has been recommended that all local safeguarding children’s partnerships develop a child sexual abuse strategy. Our resource [Developing your strategic response to child sexual abuse](#) is a guide to building an effective, evidence-based strategy.

Our [Data Insights Hub](#) offers instant access to local and national data on child sexual abuse in England and Wales. Using interactive maps and charts, it displays helpful official data from local authorities and police forces, alongside up-to-date estimates on the scale of child sexual abuse. It also includes information on the number of local support services for children who have been sexually abused and their families.

As well as providing insights into the prevalence and identification of child sexual abuse, it includes information on the number of local support services available for children who have been abused and their families.

Alongside the Response Pathway, we have also developed the following resources to support professionals in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse:

- [*What you need to know about child sexual abuse*](#). This resource introduces some of the key research and statistics on what is known about child sexual abuse: what it is, who harms children, where it takes place, the impact on children and crucially what we all can do in response.
- [*Signs and Indicators: A Template for Identifying and Recording Concerns of Child Sexual Abuse*](#). This template aims to help professionals gather and record the signs and indicators that a child may have been sexually abused or be at risk of abuse, and build a picture of their concerns.
- [*Communicating with Children: A Guide for Those Working with Children Who Have or May Have Been Sexually Abused*](#). This guide aims to help professionals understand how to talk with children about concerns of sexual abuse in a variety of contexts.
- [*Supporting Parents and Carers: A Guide for Those Working with Families Affected by Child Sexual Abuse*](#). This guide aims to help professionals provide a confident, supportive response to parents and carers when concerns about the sexual abuse of their child have been raised or identified.
- [*Safety Planning in Education: A Guide for Professionals Supporting Children following Incidents of Harmful Sexual Behaviour*](#). Offering practical advice for professionals in education to keep children safe and meet their needs, this guide includes a safety plan template for recording and reviewing agreed actions. We have also produced education-specific guides to *Communicating with Children* and *Communicating with Parents and Carers*.
- [*Managing Risk and Trauma after Online Sexual Offending: A Whole-family Safeguarding Guide*](#). A guide for social workers and others working with families after it is discovered that a parent has accessed child sexual abuse imagery – a time of great emotional distress for everyone in the family.
- [*Sibling Sexual Behaviour: A Guide to Responding to Inappropriate, Problematic and Abusive Behaviour*](#). Many professionals feel uncomfortable working with situations of sexual behaviour involving siblings. This guide helps you to identify and understand different types of behaviour, and to respond in a way that meets the safeguarding and support needs of the whole family.

- [*Using supervision and team meetings.*](#) A guide to help managers and supervisors kickstart discussions about improving responses to child sexual abuse
- [*Looking after Your Own Wellbeing.*](#) This short guide aims to help professionals manage the ongoing impact of their work and recognise when they need additional support or time out.