

Police log concerns and take initial actions

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1. Who is this document for?

This practice guide provides an overview of the initial response by police officers and staff following a report of suspected child sexual abuse. It is primarily aimed at police call handlers, attending or first response officers and support staff.

It is also relevant to any other professionals who support and protect children,¹ to help them understand the police's initial response when suspicions of child sexual abuse are reported.

2. What happens at this point?

Often the police will become aware of a child sexual abuse concern (including discovery of child sexual abuse images) through:

- a complaint made by the child themselves directly to the police

¹ 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.

- a phone call to the police from a member of the public (who may be a member of the child's family), alleging that a child is being or has been sexually abused or reporting a child's disclosure of sexual abuse
- an out-of-hours child protection referral made to the local authority's Emergency Duty team or equivalent.

In these situations, the police may – depending on the nature of the concerns – need to make an **immediate safety visit** to the child before an officer is assigned to the case. It is important that children's social care is aware of this visit. Thought will need to be given to whether this will mean that the child will have to report what has happened to multiple people on multiple occasions, and how this will be managed. This early visit by an officer will need to be mindful of the Achieving Best Evidence/Video Recorded Interview guidance.

Alternatively, they may become aware of an allegation of child sexual abuse during office hours through:

- a child protection referral made to a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) or other 'front door' service – the arrangement that a local authority has in place to respond to an initial contact from a professional or member of the public with concerns about a child
- the identification of sexual abuse, or the risk of sexual abuse, by local authority children's services while working with a child (including during a multi-agency strategy discussion).

In these situations, an Officer in the Case will be assigned immediately.

The discovery of images of child sexual abuse by another police force will also trigger the need to log concerns and respond appropriately. If the offender's whereabouts are known an arrest request may be made by that force to arrest the offender. If the child is identifiable and their location also known, the receiving force would hold a strategy discussion to plan what action is needed to protect the child.

3. How may the child be feeling?

If the child is aware that a report has been made to the police because they have told someone about their abuse, or they have reported it themselves, they may be experiencing a mix of feelings:

- **relief** and **hope** that something will be done and that the abuse, if it is ongoing, will stop
- **anxiety** about what may happen to them, their family and/or the person who has abused them

- **apprehension** about the police visiting their home and what will happen next, particularly the impact on them and their family.
- They may have had previous involvement with the police, social workers or other services, and this might influence how they are feeling. They may also have negative messages about each service from their family or community which may need to be considered and responded to.

If the police have been contacted because of suspicions or concerns of sexual abuse, the child may not be aware that the police are aware – and they may not consider themselves to be victims of abuse.

“It feels like a police officer walks into your life and decides your every move and action.” (1)

“Police need to hear the young person. Get two sides of the story and find out what the problem is. Make sure the young person feels they are listened to.” (1)

It does not matter how the concerns of child sexual abuse have come to the attention of the police; it is important that those responding always consider how the child might be feeling and respond appropriately.

4. How can the call handler best help the child when told about child sexual abuse concerns?

If the police are called by a member of the public reporting a *concern* or *suspicion* that a child is being or has been sexually abused, or is at risk of sexual abuse, the caller may have little direct evidence to share.

Be aware that a concern about *any* form of child abuse may be raised as part of a call that is primarily about something else: domestic abuse, concern for welfare, a missing child, child neglect, criminal exploitation or a child's own behaviour including criminal offending, for example. Once a concern about child sexual abuse has been raised, a child protection response will be required.

This initial contact is the start of the investigative process. It is an opportunity to obtain accurate and relevant information to support a thorough investigation, ascertain whether a crime has occurred, and give reassurance and guidance to the caller (about the preservation of forensic evidence, for example).

As the call handler, remember that you have safeguarding responsibilities; the immediate priority is to ascertain the level of risk to the child.

- Get as much information as you can from the caller about what they suspect or know. Find out what (if anything) the child has told them, and what (if anything) they have witnessed – including where and when it happened and who was

involved. Find out what the child has said in their own words and record these accurately.

- Find out what (if anything) the caller knows about the person they suspect of abusing the child – their name, any aliases, their relationship to the child, and a description.
- It will be important to establish if there are any known previous concerns about the person they suspect of abusing the child; these may have led to no action or been disputed. It does not mean they are not important.
- Find out if there is a history of concerns, including allegations of domestic abuse or violence.
- If possible, establish whether the child and the suspect (if identified) are currently at the same location, its address, and whether it is the child's home.
- Determine the vulnerability of the child and any immediate safeguarding needs, so you can grade the call. In most cases, this will be a Grade 1 response and an officer will be dispatched to attend.
- Gather as much information as you can about the child (including their age, sex, ethnic background and any known special educational needs or disabilities), and about who else is in the household, to give to the attending officer.
- Establish whether the child has any communication needs – these may be based on their developmental stage, their spoken language (English as a second language), or any disability or communication needs they may have. Chapter 7 of our [Communicating with children guide](#) offers further advice. Appendix 3 gives further guidance on working with interpreters
- Ask for the caller's contact details and, if appropriate, let them know when an officer is expected to attend.

Ensure that all information gathered is recorded accurately in the words used by the caller.

Following the call, carry out any relevant Police National Computer and other checks on the child, their family and the suspect, and start an incident log.

5. How can the attending officer best help the child?

If you are the attending officer making an immediate safety visit, this is an opportunity to gather information and evidence that will lead to the appropriate **safeguarding of the child** as well as the **detection of any crimes**. Opportunities

to locate and gather evidence may be limited in the future, and **material mustn't be lost**.

a) Before the immediate safety visit

Think what information you need to determine the **immediacy** of any safeguarding issues. Is this the start of a new investigation or part of an ongoing investigation? Do you have all the relevant material from the initial report and from checks already carried out?

If time allows, **contact children's social care** or the emergency duty team (EDT out-of-hours service) to ask whether they have any information about the child and their family. If they are not known to children's social care and you suspect they may be known to youth justice service you can contact the designated Youth Justice police officer for information. If you have no time, ask the control room to contact them on your behalf.

Consider how you will communicate with the child and family in a way that causes **minimal distress**. Using the information you have, think about the child's age and stage of development, their sex, gender, cultural background (including any language needs), and any disability or communication difficulties. Parts C and D of our [Communicating with children guide](#) offers more detailed advice.

Remember to **think about the child as an individual** – don't make assumptions based on what you know of their characteristics or circumstances (by assuming that their age, sex or social class makes them unlikely to have experienced some forms of sexual abuse, for example, or by regarding them as more 'adult' than children from other ethnic backgrounds, a response known as adultification²).

If the concerns raised relate to **harmful sexual behaviour by another child** (including a sibling or other family member), you will need to consider the welfare of the child who has harmed as well as the child who has been harmed.

Remember that a child who has harmed is still a child; furthermore, they themselves may be a victim of abuse or neglect.

² This is often referred to as Adultification and is a process whereby ideas of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children because of their personal characteristics, socio-economic influences and/or lived experiences. The impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld.' See our practice guide on [Taking account of diversity](#).

b) During the visit

Communicating with the child and their family

If your visit comes as a surprise, bear in mind that this may cause the child **trauma, anxiety** and **confusion** on top of any emotions they are feeling as a result of the abuse.

Communicate with the child in a way that is child centred, developmentally appropriate, reassuring, non-judgemental and empathetic, while remaining impartial and professional. To find out more, see the College of Policing's [briefing note for first responders](#), and our [Communicating with Children Guide](#).

Talk to the child about **how they are feeling** (see section 3 above), and observe how other members of the family are behaving around them. Reassure them, and let them know that **your priority is to keep them safe**.

Find out as much as you can about the alleged abuse, and record the facts as told to you by the child, **in their own words**.

Protecting the child

If the person suspected of sexually abusing the child is in the family home when you visit, and the child says that person has sexually abused them, there will be reasonable grounds for you to **arrest the suspect**.

Even if there is no currently no direct evidence of abuse (because, for example, your visit is based on suspicions raised by a third party and the child has not reported sexual abuse), keep the suspect away from the child and from your information/evidence-gathering for the duration of your visit.

If the child needs to be **removed to a place of safety**, find out whether they can go and stay with relatives or a family friend. Use police powers of protection as appropriate – the [Police response to concern for a child | College of Policing](#) contains a useful summary of what this involves.

Securing evidence

Whatever form the suspected abuse has taken, and whether it is suspected to have taken place inside or outside the family home, gather as much evidence as possible.

Check for any evidence of **visible injuries** (such as bruising to the arms), and ensure this is captured through your body-worn camera, a crime scene investigator or other local arrangement.

Depending on the nature of the suspected abuse, evidence to be gathered could include **bedclothes**, other **clothing**, and any telephones, video cameras, computers, games consoles or other **electronic devices**. If you are responding to

a call about the possession and/or distribution images of child sexual abuse, secure and remove *all* such devices from the home.

Be sensitive to how the removal of personal items may affect the child. Explain why it is necessary to take the items, and that the child will be told as soon as possible whether, when and how the items will be returned. If you remove the child's mobile phone, tell them that a replacement will be provided, containing all their contacts.

To preserve possible evidence, you may want to advise the child not to dispose of any personal possessions.

Depending on how recently the abuse is thought to have taken place, you may also want to advise them not to shower or go to the toilet until after they have had a [medical examination](#) or collection of evidence using an Early Evidence Kit (EEK).

Supporting the child

Let the child and their non-abusing family members know **what is likely to happen next**, and that police officers will be in touch again. Take the opportunity to leave the victim and their wider support details of the Victims Code, which informs them about their rights through the criminal justice process and support available. [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales \(Victims' Code\) - GOV.UK](#)

Agree on how the next steps will be communicated and how the child and the non-abusing parent will be updated on progress.

c) After the visit

Before going off duty, complete a child protection referral form with all the details of your visit and submit this to the MASH/front door or your force's Public Protection Unit (PPU) or equivalent child protection unit, so that a detective or specialist officer can pick up the ongoing investigation. (If you are a member of the PPU yourself, you may be assigned to be the Officer in the Case, but this won't necessarily happen). Be sure to record:

- **what the child has told you** in their own words
- any observations about how the family responded to the child
- other **evidence** you have gathered
- any **action** you have taken, and the **rationale** for every decision you have made (including decisions *not* to take action about a matter raised)
- What you have agreed with the child about who will feed back next steps.

A [multi-agency strategy discussion](#) will be held to assess next steps, including the need for children's social care to carry out a child protection enquiry (also called a Section 47 enquiry). If there is a police investigation and a child protection enquiry, these are known together as a [joint enquiry](#); careful thought will be needed to consider how the police and children's social care can best work together and share information.

6. Where next?

- [An Officer in the Case is assigned to the police investigation.](#)
- [A multi-agency strategy discussion is held.](#)

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

Source of quotations

The quotations in this practice guide, from children who have received a criminal justice response after being sexually abused, illustrate how the child may be feeling at this point.

- (1) Warrington, C., Beckett, H., Ackerley, E., Walker, M. and Allnock, D. (2017) [Making Noise: Children's Voices for Positive Change after Sexual Abuse](#). Luton: The International Centre, University of Bedfordshire.

Procedures to be followed in cases of child abuse are set out in the Government's statutory guidance for England, [Working together to safeguard children 2026: statutory guidance](#) and in the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures \(2020\)](#). Authorised Professional Practice for police in responding to calls about child abuse is outlined in the College of Policing's [Police response to concern for a child](#) (2022).

*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.