Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse response pathway: practice guide

January 2026

Supporting the child's relationships with their family and friends

1. Who is this document for?

This practice guide is for *any* professional working with a child[1] who has been, or may have been, sexually abused.

It is vital for all professionals to support the child's relationships with their families and friends, especially if statutory agencies are not or no longer involved in the child's life. Even if those agencies *are* involved, do not assume that supporting the child's relationships with their family and friends is someone else's responsibility.

[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.

2. How might the child's relationships with family and friends be affected by the abuse?

If a child is being or has been sexually abused, the abuse is likely to have profoundly affected their relationships with their family and friends:

- In many cases, their trust in adults will have been betrayed and they may no longer feel they can trust those around them.
- They may feel let down by adults – particularly their non-abusing parent(s)[2] – for not protecting them.
- They may feel let down by their friends, or be isolated from their peers.
- Their family members are likely to be experiencing a number of emotions as a result of the abuse, all impacting on how they think about one another, including the child who has been harmed.
- In situations where one sibling has sexually harmed another sibling there will be many challenges for everyone in the family, including torn loyalties, wanting to deny the seriousness of the situation, blame of one another and other strong emotions. See our guidance on sibling sexual behaviour and abuse for further information.
- The person who harmed them may have actively undermined their relationships – for example, by making them lie to their parent(s) or threatening to cause harm to other family members. They may also have groomed the parent(s), to facilitate their abuse of the child.

  "I was scared of what people were going to start saying to me, it was like I isolated myself … like my friends, they were there for me but it felt like they didn't know me no more." (1)

  "Your family's stressed and starting to fall apart and you feel like it's your fault … you want to leave home or self harm but then that can be used against you because you don't want to be seen as mentally unstable in the court." (2)

  "Perhaps Mum was completely taken in by him too. He was really good at speaking, you know. Good at convincing. Mum worked all hours at the

[2] 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.

We use the term 'non-abusing' to mean someone 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.

hospital. Shift work, right? She depended on Dad a lot. She believed him." (3)

"I told my best friend and she was like, 'oh no that's wrong, you've got to tell someone' but she didn't tell no one either so it was like … I didn't really know who to talk to. I didn't have a great relationship with my mum, my dad … it was like I was isolated so I had no one to turn to." (1)

Supporting a child with their positive relationships, or helping them to get that support, can help to address the impact of child sexual abuse caused by the person who harmed them. It can also reduce any potential negative effects of the abuse in the future. Supportive relationships, especially with their parent(s), are among the most important factors in helping a child develop resilience and/or recover from sexual abuse. "My family were very supportive. We all helped each other so we all had that strength, we all shared the energy to all get through this." (1)

"What I do is I tell my mum every single bad dream that I have and she always reassures me saying, 'That's okay, it's just a dream.' Another thing that I was constantly told is that, 'You are safe.'" (1)

"I think the majority, most parents who find out that their child's been abused – extreme guilt, even if it wasn't their fault … I know from my own experience, my mum carries a lot of guilt for stuff that happened to me. She wasn't there. She didn't know. But definitely that's something that's hard for me, knowing that [mum] feels so guilty and blames herself. So definitely [you need] support for the family as well, 100%, especially the parents." (4)

"They were really good, the friends that stuck by me. There was one girl – I don't know how she put up with me… I could scream at her, shout at her, cry at her, laugh at her and she'd still be there. She wouldn't say much but she'd sit there and she'd listen to me." (1)

"You've got to be selective about who you tell because if you tell someone and they spread it around the school or you tell someone and they don't accept it, you're then put in a worse state than what you were." (1)

3. How can you best help the child in their family relationships?

As a professional in contact with the child and/or their family members, you can play a key role in ensuring that the child gets the support they need from those around them – and that the family members get the support *they* need too.

Establish the family's need for relationship support

No two families are the same and neither are their support needs; Speak to the child and family to find out what they feel would benefit them the most. Some things you might want to think about include:

- How do the families faith and culture affect relationships? To what extent do their beliefs and cultural norms influence their parenting?
- Some parents fear they will be at risk of harm from others in their community if they take action to protect their child from child sexual abuse, as this may be seen as bringing shame and dishonour to the family. If that is the case, how can you help the family to identify and work through those fears?
- Some parents may be ostracised from their communities, leaving them isolated and unsupported. It will be important to help the family address this and find sources of support.
- Does the parent(s)' culture clash with their child's cultural identity (because, for example, they practise a religion which the child doesn't choose to follow)? You may need to help the parent see that the child's needs at this time are more important than their own personal beliefs.
- If the child and/or the parent(s) do not have English as their first language, are there any words (or acceptable words) for 'rape' or 'sexual assault' in their first language or the language used in the home? Appendix 3 of our Communicating with Children Guide provides advice about working with interpreters.
- How will you need to vary your approach if the child or another family member has disabilities or learning difficulties?

For more information on supporting parents from minority ethnic/cultural backgrounds, and/or those with learning difficulties/disabilities, see Chapter 9 of our Supporting Parents and Carers Guide.

Help the parent(s) to come to terms with the abuse, and to understand what their child needs from them

The parent(s) may need support to come to terms with the abuse, and even to accept that it has happened. Most parents seek to support their child when they learn that the child has been or may have been sexually abused, but some parents can struggle to believe the child or will even reject them in the short term. Such reactions are often interpreted as indicating that the parent(s) already knew about the abuse and didn't take action to protect their child – but denial is a normal and functional defence which can offer protection against a painful and

distressing reality. If a parent feels that their whole world has been shattered, denying what has happened may be an attempt to hold on to some sense of security. Many parents are unsure how to support their child; they may feel strong emotions and need to have someone safe with whom they can explore these. You can help by encouraging them to **believe their child and their own instincts**. The child will need to feel that their parent(s) are calm and in control; you can advise the parent(s) that there are a wide range of organisations offering support to parents, as listed in Chapter 12 of our Supporting Parents and Carers Guide.

It may be helpful to give the child's parent(s) the following key messages about what they can do and say:

*Let your child know that **you believe them and take them seriously**. If they cannot talk about the abuse, keep telling them that:*

- *you are **concerned** for them*
- *they can **talk to you***
- *you **won't blame them**.*

*Help your child understand that **it wasn't their fault**. This is important, because they may feel responsible for what happened and you can help them know they shouldn't. You may need to explain this in detail, to counteract messages given to them by the person who abused them.*

*Let your child know that **you are on their side**. Tell them that you are going to **help them**, and that you will get through this **together**.*

*Be ready to **listen** to your child, and **avoid asking intrusive questions**. Give them time to talk to you at their own pace.*

***Stay calm**. If you become upset, angry, or out of control, it will make it more difficult for your child to feel they can talk about what has happened or about how they are feeling.*

If the child feels that their parent(s) believe them, and if they see their parent(s) reacting calmly, they may feel able to tell them more about the abuse. Check that the parent(s) understand this, and advise them to bear the following points in mind if the child does tell them about the abuse:

***Listen** to your child, rather than questioning them or putting words in their mouth. Use **prompts** such as: "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"*

*Give your child **positive reinforcement** – for example, by telling them they are brave and/or have done the right thing.*

*Let your child know that you will need to **pass on the information** they tell you about their abuse. Afterwards, **write down** what they have said in their words so that you have an accurate account.*

Support the family to rebuild family relationships

Rebuilding family relationships after child sexual abuse is often about small, consistent actions over time, rather than one-off interventions. Some practical things you can support the family with to help them feel safer, more connected and more able to repair relationships include:

Create clear, shared safety rules: Support the family to agree simple safety rules (for example about privacy, bedrooms, online use and visitors).

Respond to behaviour with calm and consistency: Help parents focus on what the child needs in the moment (regulation, reassurance, boundaries), rather than on blame or "why" questions. Encourage them to separate the child from the behaviour.

Build trust through predictability: Encourage routines, follow-through and reliability in everyday things. Trust is often rebuilt through repeated experiences of adults being consistent.

Reduce shame through language: Model and encourage clear, non-judgemental language. Support parents to say out they believe their child and that the abuse was not the child's fault to avoid secrecy, whispering or coded language within the home.

Support siblings: Encourage parents to spend individual time with siblings, acknowledge mixed feelings, and answer questions honestly and simply to prevent fear, resentment or isolation.

Create low-pressure ways to connect: Suggest shared activities that allow closeness without forcing conversation (for example cooking, walking, games or watching television together). Connection does not have to involve talking about the abuse.

Plan for disagreement and repair: Help families agree how they will handle conflict safely and away from children. Emphasise that repairing relationships after arguments is more important than avoiding disagreement altogether.

Support parents to manage their own emotions: Encourage parents and carers to seek support for themselves

Normalise setbacks: Reinforce that progress is rarely linear. Changes in behaviour or increased tension often reflect stress or adjustment, not failure.

You may want to refer the child and their family to a service that can support their family relationships and encourage sensitive, direct discussion of child sexual abuse. The Association for Family Therapy can help families find a trained family therapist in their area.

Chapter 6 of our Supporting Parents and Carers Guide is devoted to relationship-building.

Family relationships may also be strengthened if the parent(s) receive support to:

- manage the impact of the abuse on themselves and other family members, particularly if there are other children in the family
- manage relationships with other agencies/professionals, such as the child's school/college or GP.

4. How can you best help the child in their relationships outside the family?

As with family relationships, find out whether the child needs support to manage their relationships with their friends and other children. Peer groups are the most important support system for many children, with older children in particular often preferring to confide in their friends rather than an adult.

Encourage the child to think about **whether, when and how they will tell their friends** about their sexual abuse, if they have not done so already. Reassure them that they can decide not to tell their friends – and bear in mind that they may not have any close friends whom they trust. Some friends may also find it hard to understand what has happened. Questions to consider include:

- How do they think their friends will respond? Will some of them be upset? Will they want to believe the child? How will friends' reactions affect the child?
- Are the friends likely to tell other children what has happened?
- Are the friends likely to tell their own parents? How will those parents react?

You can encourage the child to tell their friends what they need from them. This might be by saying:

- "Just let me talk."
- "Let me know you believe me."
- "Just be my friend."
- Even when the child has told some of their friends what has happened, there will be times when the child does not want to discuss this with them. It can be

useful to give them a script for these times, e.g. "I need some help to distract me from this today – can we talk about something else?"

- Depending on the age of the child, you may need to speak to them about how to respond to any negative comments, misinformation or rumours they become aware of through social media.

Childline's webpage Helping a Friend explains to children how they can help a friend who is in distress.

The child may worry about what will happen if **other children** find out about the abuse. You may want to help them plan how they manage their social interactions, both online and in person, by thinking through these questions:

- What will they say if someone finds out/talks to them about the abuse?
- How will they explain it if they suddenly become upset?
- How will they explain any time taken out of school/college for appointments?

If you want to signpost the child to further support, Youth Access provides information about **local counselling and advice services** for young people aged 12–25. And you may also find a **peer support group** in your local area.

Our practice guide *Supporting the child's education* contains advice on supporting the child's relationships in a school/college setting.

5. Where next?

While you are supporting the child and their family, make sure that *you* are receiving enough support, through supervision and/or peer support; this is particularly important when dealing with concerns about child sexual abuse. See our practice guide *Taking care of your own wellbeing* for more information.

Remember that the child is also likely to need support in other areas of their life. The other practice guides in this series can help you to support them with:

- their emotional health and wellbeing
- their education
- their physical health

Or return to the response pathway.

Sources of quotations

The quotations in this practice guide, from children who have been sexually abused, illustrate how the child may be feeling at this point and how your actions can make a difference:

(1) Warrington, C., Beckett, H., Ackerley, E., Walker, M. and Allnock, D. (2017) *Making Noise: Children's Voices for Positive Change after Sexual Abuse. Children's Experiences of Help-seeking and Support after Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

(2) Beckett, H. and Warrington, C. (2015) *Making Justice Work: Experiences of Criminal Justice for Children and Young People Affected by Sexual Exploitation as Victims and Witnesses*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

(3) Jones, A. and De Breo, H. (2017) It's my party, I'll cry if I want to: Interpreting narratives of sexual abuse in childhood. In Woodiwiss, J., Smith, K. and Lockwood, K. (eds.) *Feminist Narrative Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

(4) Warrington, C., Beckett, H., Allnock, D. and Soares, C. (2023) Children's perspectives on family members' needs and support after child sexual abuse. *Children and Youth Services Review,* 149:106925.

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 2023: statutory guidance (2023) and in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2020).

*This practice primer outlines specific considerations for professionals working with children 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.