

Supporting the child's education

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1. Who is this document for?

This practice guide is for teaching and early years staff working with a child¹ who has been, or may have been, sexually abused. It is also relevant for any other professionals working with the child, in particular social care staff and youth justice workers.

It is vital for all professionals to think about the support the child will need in terms of their education, especially if statutory agencies are not involved in their life (because they have declined to pursue a referral or have closed the case). Even when agencies are involved, it is important that everyone involved with the child understands they have a responsibility to ensure the child's education is prioritised.

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 education be affected by the abuse?

When a child is being sexually abused, or when concerns of sexual abuse have been raised, the child's experience of school² is likely to be affected. They may see school as a safe space, and immerse themselves in their academic work and activities; alternatively, they may be unwilling to go to school, refuse to go, or start truanting. They may feel unsafe or overwhelmed in school, or feel that they cannot trust either staff or other children.

"School might be the only place that [you] can feel relaxed." (1)

"If you go to school that's really important. You know it just keeps you around normal people ... it's like rules and people telling you what to do. At the time I didn't think that was a good thing but it is, believe me." (2)

"I dropped out of college because I just couldn't cope ... like I was just in a room full of boys, there was only one other girl. They were just having a laugh about [sex] and making jokes about it. It was really difficult and I just couldn't cope with it. So I dropped out and so I had no support network when the whole police thing was going on ... I just felt so alone." (1)

"PSHE was really hard for me because it was about abuse and that – I just had to try and get through it ... I just put my head down and was trying not to listen but then you get told off for not taking things in." (1)

The child may also find it difficult to concentrate and/or learn while at school, and become fidgety and underachieve. They may show their distress through their behaviour, such as inappropriate touching (of themselves or others), emotional outbursts or lack of cooperation. They may fall out with their peers.

"It was a big impact on my exams, I didn't get no GCSEs or anything, I was in the exam but because my mind was so full up on that I didn't have time to revise, I didn't have time to worry about GCSEs or a piece of paper." (3)

"When I was going to court, I was getting distracted and I was going down on my levels at school and stuff like that." (1)

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

² We use 'school' to refer to the child's place of learning, whether that is a school, a college, a pupil referral unit, or any other alternative education provision.

It is important that you notice these behaviours and presentations as the impact of the abuse and provide a supportive response, this will be critical in helping the child continue to get the best out of their education and help them with healing over time.

"I did actually have really good mentors in school. They didn't know what had happened to me, but they kind of accepted and understood that I needed time away and they supported me in that. They didn't really try and pressure me to come back to school. To be honest, at one point it was looking like I was actually going to leave school, and that was in Year 10. But then because they gave me the space and the time away that I needed and let me get the help I needed, I then went back and then when I went back they were all really supportive." (1)

"Like me and Miss 'B', because she's been there for me for so long, like a bond ... She helped me quite a lot. She told me what was going to happen; she told me what was going on, so she showed me a good understanding of the situation that I was put in." (1)

"I think without your support at school, you don't really feel safe. I personally didn't feel safe anywhere at first and still sometimes don't. It's important that they know you feel like that and they can offer you things. I've got a time out card which means if I need to, I can leave the lesson for five to 10 minutes and just go and calm down and they can put a support worker in place for you at school. It can really help you." (1)

"My high school just completely didn't notice the warning signs, they just assumed that I was bad full stop. They didn't actually know what was going on and they are probably the only people who could have helped back then. But I didn't trust them." (4)

3. How can you best help the child?

Helping a child feel engaged in their education and supporting their future plans for education, training or employment is vital to their recovery from sexual abuse. This is important whenever there are concerns a child has been sexually abused, whether or not children's social care or police have taken further action. Our practice guide on [When the threshold for intervention is not met](#), explains this further. This section covers:

- keeping the child engaged in their learning
- helping them to manage their emotions
- supporting them with their friendships and wider relationships.

Keep the child engaged in their learning

As a professional working with the child, you can check that efforts to keep them in school and engaged in their learning continue throughout their education.

Schools have a legal duty to safeguard their students, which means that school staff must support the child's emotional wellbeing. Staff should understand that the child's behaviour is a symptom of the abuse (or, if confidentiality is required, 'a difficult home situation').

The school can support the child to keep on track with their learning at a pace that feels right for them. For example:

- Ask the child about any subjects they might be finding more difficult and agree with them what can be put in place to help. This might range from a subtle thumbs up from the teacher to check understanding, to more structured interventions to support learning such as more time to complete tasks, small group work or differentiated learning materials. Some lessons, such as relationships and sex education, may be particularly challenging for them to undertake in a group environment so making alternative arrangements may be helpful. Make sure to 'check-in' with the child first before making alternative arrangements and review these over time.
- Do not give the child more work to catch up on, or keep them back at lunch break or playtimes to recover lost learning.
- If the child's attendance or attainment levels drop, respond with supportive interventions and not disciplinary measures. Recognise that the trauma of the abuse can impact a child's working memory, and previously embedded learning may be significantly compromised.
- Additional support may be needed in less structured times of the day: instead of finding their own things to do at breaks and lunch times, the child may benefit from being directed to more structured activities or allocated a buddy.
- The child may overachieve as a response to being sexually abused. Be careful to ensure that, in that case, they do not receive less support than those whose behaviour is considered more challenging.
- Agreeing on a routine check-in to review learning will provide the opportunity to discuss and acknowledge the child's progress

Help the child to manage their emotions

There are a number of ways in which the school can help the child to manage their emotions:

- Explain to the child that there may be times they feel a bit overwhelmed. Reassure them and tell them this is a normal response; it can help to give them examples of how this might present so they can understand their feelings and emotions.
- Help the child identify situations – such as a lesson on relationships and sex - which may **trigger a reaction**, and help them identify a **safe person** to whom they can go if they are feeling upset. (Staff may require training around potential triggers and reactions, and reminders to think about these when planning activities and lessons.)
- Some children will benefit from identifying more than one **safe person** they can go to if they feel upset.
- The **safe person** should actively demonstrate to the child that they are holding them in mind,(e.g. seek them out throughout the day for a catch-up) and not simply wait for the child to approach them when they need them or are upset.
- Give the child a **sign** (e.g. a card they can discreetly show a teacher) to indicate that they need to take some time out or find their safe person or place.
- Let the child know that they can ring home if they are feeling anxious or upset.

Any professional working with the child can help them to create an '**emotional first aid kit**': a set of items to help them manage difficult feelings and ground themselves when needed. Depending on the child's age and other characteristics, these could include:

- something tactile to play with
- colouring books
- strong-smelling oils, such as lavender oil
- calming music
- a set of self-help statements.

Further information about supporting a [child's emotional health and wellbeing](#) can be found in this practice guide.

In some cases referrals in relation to concerns of sexual abuse may not have been accepted by children's social care, or they may have decided [threshold for statutory intervention has not been met](#). In these situations it is advised that education staff:

- Check **why** this decision has been made. It is important that you understand why this decision was made and that recording about it is accurate. Too often

these decisions are made without there being clarity for the child themselves, or the professionals who support them.

- Check to see if anyone from children's social care or the police have spoken to the child about the decision.
- Check the child's understanding of why this decision was made.
- Recognise the impact that this decision may have on the child and speak to them about this. It is important the child understands that there can be many reasons that a referral cannot be followed up, or the case is closed. It is not evidence that harm did not happen, or that the child has not been believed.
- Continue to support the child as suggested above.
- Continue to monitor the child and escalate any further concerns.

Remember that parents³ are a key part of a child's support system and may have helpful information about their child's needs – but they may also have health needs of their own, which should be considered. Our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#) contains more information.

Support the child with their friendships and wider relationships

Other children in the school may already know that something has happened, and this can be very difficult for the child; they may face bullying and or victim-blaming, in person and/or online. It can also be difficult for the other children, who may also feel confused and afraid.

There are a number of ways in which professionals can support the child in their relationships with other children:

- Help the child decide which of their peers (if any) to talk to, what to tell them, and when to tell them. For example, they may need to think about whether their friends are likely to tell other children what has happened.
- Help them think about how their friends might respond, and how this may feel for the child. Some friends might get upset or might not want to believe them.

³ 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.

- Reassure the child that they can choose whether or not to tell their friends at this stage, or at all. Bear in mind that their friends might tell their own parents, who may react supportively, but may not, for example, by telling their child to avoid the child who has been harmed or telling others in the school community.
- 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.
- If children communicate about the child sexual abuse they have experienced, they most commonly turn to family or friends, and school staff have a role in educating children about what to do if a friend or peer says they are being sexually abused. See Appendix 1 of our [Communicating with children guide](#).

The child is also likely to need support to manage their wider social interactions, online and in person, with both adults and children. Help them to plan what they will say if someone finds out/talks to them about the abuse. How will they explain any need to take time out of school for appointments? What will they say if they are suddenly upset?

If you are the child's teacher or safe adult at the school, reassure them that the only staff who know about their situation are those who *need* to know. Tell them who these staff members are.

If another child has displayed harmful sexual behaviour

It can be particularly challenging for a school to support a child who has been, or may have been, sexually harmed by another child or children in the school.

Our guide to [Safety Planning in Education](#) sets out actions you can take so that the education needs of both the child who has been harmed and the child(ren) who has harmed are kept safe and receive the support they need.

4. Equipping school staff to support sexually abused children

The support from staff at the child's school can be hugely valuable, but the school must recognise that providing this support may feel complex and emotionally draining.

School leaders can best provide a supportive response by embedding a **whole-school approach**⁴, where staff have the time and skills to talk with and listen to children regularly. Children can build up trusting relationships with one or more school staff, who can then support them with their individual needs.

When cases of sexual abuse arise, it is helpful for school staff to be able to seek specialist advice from a local child/family **independent sexual violence advisor** (ISVAs), who can provide ongoing support and guidance. If you are unsure how to contact your local ISVA, you can use the search tool on the Survivors Trust's [ISVA webpage](#).

It is important for school staff to feel **confident in proactively talking to children** where they have concerns that a child has been sexually abused or where they know a child has been sexually abused, and this may require providing appropriate training, practical guidance and supervision/support. Our [Communicating with children guide](#) contains useful information and advice on communicating with children, including what you can say and ask about (Part C), and having conversations in different contexts (Part D).

Make sure that staff know how they should interact with the **person(s) suspected or alleged to have sexually abused** or harmed the child. Staff should not share with them any information that the child has said about the abuse, nor facilitate contact between them and the child. For example, the school should heed a non-abusing⁵ parent's request that their ex-partner should not be allowed to collect their child from school, if there are sexual abuse concerns about the ex-partner.

Supervision and/or peer support is particularly important for staff who are working with sexually abused children. See our practice guide [Taking care of your own wellbeing](#) for more information.

⁴ [Keeping children safe in education](#)

⁵ 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.

5. Where next?

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

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) Hallett, S. (2013) ['Child Sexual Exploitation' in South-East Wales: Problems and Solutions from the Perspectives of Young People and Professionals](#). Cardiff: Cardiff University.
- (3) Allnock, D., Beckett, H., Soares, C., Warrington, C., Hagell, A. and Starbuck, L. (2021) [Learning from the Experts: Young People's Views on Their Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Needs following Sexual Abuse in Adolescence: Briefing Paper](#). London: Association for Young People's Health.
- (4) Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Hanson, E., Whittle, H. and Beech, A. (2017) ["Everyone Deserves to Be Happy and Safe": A Mixed Methods Study Exploring How Online and Offline Child Sexual Abuse Impact Young People and How Professionals Respond to It](#). London: NSPCC.

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: statutory guidance](#) and in the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures \(2020\)](#).

*This practice guide 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.