

# The child is supported through a child protection plan

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## 1. Who is this document for?

This practice guide is aimed primarily at professionals who are part of the ‘core group’ which will develop, implement and review a child protection plan in cases where there are concerns of child sexual abuse (possibly alongside concerns of other forms of abuse or neglect). It explains how the core group can maintain a focus on the child’s<sup>1</sup> needs and on addressing the sexual abuse concerns.

It is also relevant to other professionals working with the child, helping them understand what the core group does and how a child protection plan is drawn up.

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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 does it mean to be supported through a child protection plan?

At this point, a child protection conference will have decided that the child should be made the subject of a child protection plan<sup>2</sup> under a specific category or categories of harm. Even if the child has not been made the subject of a plan under the category of child sexual abuse, any sexual abuse concerns should still be addressed, with clear actions/interventions specifically addressing this concern and allocated to a named person.

An outline child protection plan will have been discussed at the initial child protection case conference, based on the findings of the child protection enquiry and multi-agency assessment. The child protection plan will be further developed and implemented by the **core group** – a multi-agency forum involving professionals responsible for delivering specific aspects of the plan – at its first meeting, within 10 days of the conference. The core group then meets every six weeks to review the plan.

The social worker allocated to the child will lead the core group, whose membership may change over time. If the child has support from an independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) or a child and young person's sexual violence advocate (CYPSVA/CHISVA), they will be part of the core group. Normally the police or a sexual assault referral centre will refer the child to an ISVA, although any professional or the family can do so; if a referral has not yet been made, ensure that this is actioned. (Any professional can make a referral, or help the child/family to do so; you can use the Survivors Trust website to [search for an ISVA service in your local area](#).)

The child may attend the core group meetings, depending on their age/stage of development and their wishes and feelings; their non-abusing parent(s)<sup>3</sup> will also attend.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the terminology used in England; in Wales the child is placed on the **child protection register**, and the plan drawn up 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.

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

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

When they are placed on a child protection plan, the child may – once they have understood what this means – feel much safer and be hopeful that they are about to start a new/better life.

*“It’s a plan of your life, like what happens in it and how they are going to help you, like a meeting, appointments and stuff.” (1)*

*“It gives you a bit of priority and gives you, it compensates the fact that, whatever happens at home, it compensates the outside stuff like you can live a normal life.” (2)*

They may, however, be distressed by changes to their living or contact arrangements, and having to have regular contact with a social worker and other professionals at times that may not always suit them and may interfere with their daily life. This may cause them frustration.

*“[When you’re on a child protection plan, social workers] help you but in some other ways they don’t because like if you’re on the plan you like, you gotta ask, you gotta tell them like if you want to go stay at your friends, you’ve gotta tell them the name and they’ve got to be checked out by the police... They’re a lot more lenient [if you’re on a] child in need [plan].” (2)*

*“I just think it’s absolutely stupid that... [the social workers are] always coming round and it’s like we have to revolve all that we do around them and I just don’t like it. It’s horrible.” (2)*

The child may also fear being bullied, stigmatised or ostracised by peers who become aware that they are on a child protection plan.

Additionally, they may continue to feel that they have done something wrong, which has caused distress and disruption to their family. It is important that the child protection plan addresses who the child can talk to about these worries and, where parents are blaming of the child, how this will be addressed.

### 4. How can the core group best help the child?

#### ***Involving the child and their non-abusing parent(s)***

Led by the child’s social worker, the core group should discuss how the child and their family can be fully supported – both in the plan itself and through their involvement in the process of developing and reviewing the plan.

Initially, the child protection plan will need to be explained in a child-centred and developmentally appropriate way; if your local authority does not have a child-friendly leaflet, you might suggest they develop one for future use.

Be aware that the child and/or their parents may resent having a social worker. Reassure the child that they were right to seek help, and that a child protection plan provides that help for them and their family. Their parent(s) may need to be reminded not to blame the child: the decision to support them through a child protection plan was taken by professionals, who are trying to help. Remind the parent(s) that they can seek advice from voluntary-sector organisations such as the [Family Rights Group](#) to understand what is happening.

Depending on their age/stage of development, and their wishes and feelings, the child may be involved in the core group. A child who wants to attend core group meetings is likely to need support to do so. Consider referring them to an **advocacy service** if there is one in your area. If there is not, decide who within the core group – including the child's non-abusing parent(s) – is best placed to provide that support.

If the child does *not* attend core group meetings, the social worker should:

- Visit the child and ask them what their wishes and feelings are, what they think they need and what help they might find useful. The social worker can record how the child wants their views shared in the meeting/s.
- consider, in partnership with other agencies, how the child's views will be communicated to the meetings.
- provide feedback directly to the child after each meeting.

The social worker also should ensure that child's non-abusing parent(s) are supported to attend, again taking account of their individual needs (see below). The parent(s) must be treated as valued partners in the core group.

### ***Considering the individual needs of the child and their family***

All professionals in the core group should ensure that they take account at all times of the child's individual characteristics and circumstances, and those of the child's family. Remember to:

- address any communication issues faced by the child or their parent(s) around disabilities, learning difficulties or language, making sure you are clear about the child's preferred communication style.
- think about the ethnicity, religion and culture of the child and their family, and what the concerns of sexual abuse may mean in this context – particularly in relation to potential stigma and shame around sexual matters.
- consider whether experiences of discrimination and bias (based on characteristics such as ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity) may influence the willingness of the child and their family to engage with professionals trying to support them.

Our practice guide [Taking account of diversity](#) contains more information.

### *Drawing up a safety plan with the family*

Ensuring and promoting safety within the family will be a priority, especially when sexual abuse has happened within the family, and a key way to achieve this is through a safety plan which covers issues such as sexual boundaries, rules regarding bedrooms and bathrooms, and safe internet access.

For a safety plan to be effective, it must be more than a written document which is signed by the family: it must be **written by the family** (with support from the social worker) and **feel meaningful** to them. The process of discussing family safety is often as impactful as the plan itself, and should involve the whole family if possible. With the exception of very young children, every family member should have the opportunity to voice their feelings about safety and how they would like the whole family to work together in building a safe home.

If the child is abused outside the family home a robust safety plan will also be needed to safeguard and protect them, possibly across a range of contexts and from more than one person of concern. For example, at school, within other institutions, the wider community or in digital spaces. Multi agency and contextual approaches that seek to disrupt the person (s) of concern, safeguard the child (ren) at risk of harm, make environments or spaces safe for children to spend time in and provide proportionate support to help the child recover are all important considerations in responding to harm outside the family home. The [Contextual Safeguarding website](#) contains more information and support to do this.

Where the child's parents are assessed as being protective it will be important that they are included in understanding the risk their child is at outside of the home, so that they can best take steps to safeguard and protect them.

Children who are harmed outside the family home may not always perceive themselves as being harmed at the time and this can place significant strain on parents and other family members, whose child appears to be under someone else's influence. Consider too whether the protective parent(s) themselves may be being groomed, coerced or controlled by the person (s) of concern, and the implications of this for their capacity to keep their child safe and supported.

Supporting parents around the impact of harm outside the family home is an important in area of need. See chapter 8 in our [Supporting parents and carers guide](#) for guidance on supporting parents when their child is being sexually abused in different contexts.

To be most effective safety plans when the risk is outside of the home need to be written at a time of calm, alongside the child and family, with support from

professionals involved and should feel meaningful to them. The safety plan should take account of the child's age and stage of development, be child's rights based but also be balanced against the need to disrupt, safeguard and provide proportionate support to the child (ren) to recover.

Some children will be harmed within familial contexts as well as being harmed outside the family home. It is important that both traditional social work and police safeguarding systems are utilised in these cases, alongside contextual approaches. An either-or approach to safeguarding children being harmed across intra and extra familial contexts should be avoided; each safeguarding system must work together to meet the holistic needs of the child (ren).

Safety plans should also:

- use language that is meaningful to the whole family
- place realistic expectations on family members
- respect and build on the existing strengths of the family
- address the needs of all children and adults in the family
- consider 'risky times' such as night-time, sleepovers, having visitors, and going on holiday
- address communication within the family
- have a focus on the use of technology
- be respected and supported by the family's wider support network
- allow room for regular review as circumstances change.
- consider the context the harm is happening in and take multi agency approaches to safety
- consider the needs of all children harmed individually and where appropriate collectively
- support parents to understand safeguarding approaches when harm is happening outside the family home

Our [guide to assessing and responding to sibling sexual behaviour](#) contains additional advice on drawing up a family safety plan in situations of harmful sexual behaviour by a sibling.

In situations where an adult in the family has downloaded child sexual abuse imagery or other material and may therefore pose a risk to the child(ren) in the family, you can find information about safety planning in our guide [Managing](#)

[Risk and Trauma after Online Sexual Offending](#); it also explains how learning about the offence may affect the child(ren) and other family members.

## 5. What should be in the child protection plan?

The plan should focus on the child's needs, and be influenced by what they say they want and need for themselves and their family. Of critical importance is that the concerns about sexual abuse are made clear and central to the plan. This must be the case even in situations where police investigations have concluded with no further police action at this time.

The plan should set out actions to:

- address **any known impact of the sexual abuse on the child** – this may include therapeutic or wellbeing support; a referral to a sexual health clinic or a sexual assault referral centre (SARC), if sexual health concerns remain; support to make the best use of education and leisure activities; and any other specialist input required. See [Supporting a child's emotional health and well being](#) for further advice.
- address the impact of the sexual abuse on **family relationships**, in particular the child's relationship with their non-abusing parent(s) and with their siblings, which may have been actively disrupted through grooming and/or the identification of the abuse. See [Supporting a child's relationships](#) for further advice, and our [Supporting parents and carers](#) resource for more detailed information, in particular chapter 6.
- provide ongoing opportunities for the child to **talk with a safe and trusted adult** away from the home environment about any concerns they have, including sexual abuse
- support the child to be **formally interviewed** by the police and a social worker if this is in the plan – consider that the child may fear reprisals, feel embarrassed or find giving a statement difficult because of a disability or learning difficulty, their communication style or cultural issues.
- support the child whilst a police investigation is in progress, or any trial is taking place, particularly if the child will be a witness. More information can be found about this in [The case goes to the Crown Court](#).
- address **other concerns of harm**, such as neglect and emotional abuse.

The core group will need to keep reviewing the effectiveness of all this support, and address any delays in its provision.

The child protection plan should also describe how a **safety plan** will be put in place (see above), and address the needs of the child's **non-abusing parent(s)**:

- The parent(s) may need support so they can recover from the impact of **learning that their child has been sexually abused**, and can **believe the child and support them** through any further investigations and recovery from the abuse. They may find it difficult to **come to terms with the abuse** and **accept that it has happened**. While most parents will try to support their child following identification or concerns of abuse, others may reject their child or refuse to believe them; professionals sometimes regard this as an indication that the parent(s) already knew about the abuse and failed to take action to protect their child, but **denial is a normal and functional defence** that allows us to protect ourselves against painful and distressing events. If a parent feels that their world has been shattered, denial may be an attempt to hold on to some sense of security. In situations where **the child does not acknowledge that they have been sexually abused**, the parent(s) should be supported to keep telling the child that they are concerned for them and can be talked to without blame. See chapter 2 of our [Supporting parents and carers](#) resource.
- The parent(s) may fear they will be at risk of **harm from others in their own community** if they act to protect their child from child sexual abuse, as this will be seen as bringing shame and dishonour to the family. These fears need to be identified and worked through, with support provided to the family. You may need advice or support from specialist organisations to do this – our [Supporting Parents and Carers Guide](#) lists many such organisations.
- Where the child has experienced harm outside the family home it can put a real strain on the relationships children have with others, including family members. Getting relationships back on track after harm outside the family home can be challenging, but it is possible. Parents can feel like they have lost part of their relationship with their child and wonder if their relationship can heal. Support to help parents reconnect with their child will be a really important part of the whole family's recovery journey. Helping parents to communicate the positive things about their child, noticing the things they like about the time they spend together and sharing them, as well as being open about any future worries they have can help things improve. We know that those who harm children can have a hold on the child for a long time after the abuse of them stops. Supporting parents to understand this can be very helpful.
- The parent(s) may need help to **understand the process of sexual abuse**, including how they and the child may have been groomed, coerced and controlled.
- The parent(s) will need support in their **parenting role**. If any issues (such as a learning disability/difficulty, coercion and control through ongoing domestic abuse, substance misuse, or poor mental health) are reducing their **capacity**

**to protect their child**, these need to be addressed – with recognition that these vulnerabilities may have been exploited and worsened by the person who abused the child.

Other elements to include in the child protection plan will depend on the context in which the child has been sexually abused.

### ***a) Intra-familial child sexual abuse by an adult***

Where there are concerns that an adult in the family network may have sexually abused the child, but there is insufficient information to be certain about this, **the child protection plan should still name concerns about sexual abuse**. All agencies should continue to be alert to the possible signs and indicators of sexual abuse, and may find it useful to refer to our [Signs and Indicators Template](#).

Similarly, ensure that there is appropriate **support for the siblings** of the child who has been abused.

Additional considerations will depend on whether the adult of concern is still in the family home:

- If they have moved out of the family home or never lived there, the core group should discuss **whether it is appropriate for the child to see them**; any contact must be safe and supervised, and be subject to ongoing review. It is essential that the child's wishes and feelings regarding contact are taken into account. Care should be taken to ensure that, if a child is expressing a wish to have contact with the person of concern, this is not due to fear, a wish to please or due to a traumatic sexualised bond with the person.
- In the unusual circumstances where they remain living in the home, owing to a lack of evidence which would require them to leave, the child protection plan must cover **boundaries, bedroom and bathroom rules** (see 'Drawing up a safety plan with the family' above) and anything else required to prevent opportunities arising for the grooming and sexual abuse of children and the coercion of the non-abusing parent(s).

Even when concerns of sexual abuse have not been substantiated, it is essential not to give the adult of concern an opportunity for further sexual grooming or abuse, nor to place them in a **position of privilege** by asking them to undertake tasks within the child protection plan.

### **Commissioning an external assessment**

You may want to commission an external assessment of the adult of concern. In that case:

- Think about the questions you want the assessor to explore – you need to be explicit that you want them to assess *sexual* risk.

- Bear in mind that, in general, a risk assessment does not tell you whether or not someone has sexually harmed – instead it should tell you the likelihood of that, and the likelihood of future offending, and then what can and can't be put in place to reduce risk.
- Ensure that the assessment is holistic, taking into account the adult's role in the family. If they are or have recently been in a relationship, the assessor should meet with their partner/ex-partner where possible, to gain their perspective on what has happened. An 'ability to protect' assessment of the child's non-abusing parent should generally go alongside a risk assessment.
- All information shared by the adult of concern should be triangulated (e.g. using observations by a teacher, discussion with their offender manager if they have one, GP records on mental health, or other access to services) – relying on what they tell you is not enough.

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

In drawing up a child protection plan where the child has been sexually harmed by a sibling, make sure that:

- the sibling who has harmed is receiving support or therapeutic input to address their harmful behaviour, and other support to address any emerging needs (including the possibility that they too have been sexually abused/harmed in some way)
- if the sibling who has harmed is now living away from the family, safe arrangements are in place for them to see their family, and consideration is given to ensuring that they feel part of the family
- the impact on the siblings' parent(s) and wider family is addressed through support and services, including work to repair the harm to family/sibling relationships. Harmful sexual behaviour by a sibling can be particularly traumatic for parents to deal with, and often affects their own relationship and the stability of their family; this should be recognised and explored empathically.

### ***c) Extra familial sexual abuse (including in an online environment)***

Where there are concerns that the child has been sexually abused (or is at risk of sexual abuse) outside the home environment, including online, the child protection plan should cover:

- action being taken by the police, community safety partnerships or other appropriate organisations to address and disrupt the behaviour of adults and children about whom there are concerns of sexual abuse – the Home Office's

[child exploitation disruption toolkit](#) contains information about the measures available

- a mapping process whereby the connections between adults or children of concern are known, and the risks to other children and young people considered
- work planned to address the impact of the abuse on the child's family relationships
- safety planning around the child's internet use.

Many children who have been sexually abused in online contexts feel that they do not get the support they need, and that professionals and family members fail to recognise the abuse's impact. You can take action to ensure that the child is able to speak about this form of harm, that it is taken seriously, and that appropriate support and help is provided:

- The child may feel that they are to blame because their own use of technology means they participated in the abuse. 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.
- 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 world.
- You may lack confidence because you feel the child is more 'expert' in technology than you are – remember that 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.

It's important to develop a plan that keeps the child safe, but which recognises the role that technology plays in their everyday social and emotional life. Ensure that appropriate support and help is provided.

### **If the child has engaged in harmful sexual behaviour**

In some cases, a child thought to have been sexually abused may also have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour themselves. When drawing up a child protection plan for the child, make sure that they are provided with appropriate services and support to address both **their own needs** and any **risks they present to others**. These services and support should be regularly **reviewed and updated**, and any **delays** in their provision addressed.

- If the child remains living at home, a **family safety plan** should be developed and reviewed regularly, taking into account the safety of any other children in the family and any change of circumstances. Our [guide to](#)

[assessing and responding to sibling sexual behaviour](#) can help you to develop the family safety plan.

- If the child is living away from the family home, the core group will need to develop **safe contact arrangements** and discuss how to ensure that the child continues to feel part of the family.

## 6. How can you best help the child when reviewing the child protection plan?

Throughout the core group process, all professionals in the group should provide information about the progress of any support or therapeutic interventions they are providing, and how these make a difference to the wellbeing of the child and their family.

Subsequent meetings of the core group should review the progress of the child protection plan and ensure that the support outlined in section 5 is being provided. Keep reviewing the effectiveness of all this support, and address any delays in its provision. Check with the child and their family how well they feel the plan is going and if they feel it is addressing their needs. Ensure that you give children the opportunity to meet with you on their own, in a place where they won't worry about being overheard by other family members, for example.

This review progress will need to consider whether the child has been supported to share any further concerns about child sexual abuse, remembering that children talking about the abuse they have experienced is an iterative process which takes place over time, with the building of trusted relationships.

Other concerns of harm, such as neglect, physical abuse and emotional abuse, must of course continue to be addressed, but this does not mean that sexual abuse stops being considered. There is a danger in practice that child neglect, particularly, can override concerns about child sexual abuse and mean they get lost. The core group is the place to consider this.

The core group should also consider the need for further police action, or review the progress of ongoing police action: more evidence of sexual abuse may have emerged through the implementation of the child protection plan.

In cases of suspected intra-familial sexual abuse where an adult of concern remains living in the home, the core group must check that the child protection plan is not giving this adult the opportunity for further grooming or place them in a position of privilege by allocating tasks to them.

The child protection plan will also be reviewed during child protection conferences; any decision to end the plan and cease support from children's social care will be made at a child protection conference.

## 7. Where next?

- [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 Jordon, P. (2016) '[You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you](#)': [Children's views on participation in the child protection system](#). *Child and Family Social Work*, 21(1):103–112.
- (2) Cossar, J., Brandon, M. and Jordon, 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.

*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 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.*