

## Sexual Abuse

**Sexual abuse** is any sexual activity with a child. You should be aware that many children and young people who are victims of sexual abuse do not recognise themselves as such. A child may not understand what is happening and may not even understand that it is wrong. Sexual abuse can have a long-term impact on mental health.

Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

**There are two different types of child sexual abuse. These are called contact abuse and non-contact abuse.**

**Contact abuse** involves touching activities where an abuser makes physical contact with a child, including penetration. It includes:

- sexual touching of any part of the body whether the child's wearing clothes or not
- rape or penetration by putting an object or body part inside a child's mouth, vagina or anus
- forcing or encouraging a child to take part in sexual activity
- making a child take their clothes off, touch someone else's genitals or masturbate.

**Non-contact abuse** involves non-touching activities, such as grooming, exploitation, persuading children to perform sexual acts over the internet and flashing. It includes:

- encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts
- not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to sexual activities by others
- meeting a child following sexual grooming with the intent of abusing them
- online abuse including making, viewing or distributing child abuse images
- allowing someone else to make, view or distribute child abuse images
- showing pornography to a child
- sexually exploiting a child for money, power or status (child exploitation).

When sexual exploitation happens online, young people may be persuaded, or forced, to:

- send or post sexually explicit images of themselves
- take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone
- have sexual conversations by text or online.

Abusers may threaten to send images, video or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in other sexual activity. Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the sexual abuse has stopped.

## **NSPCC statistics**

Official statistics, published annually, show the amount of child sexual abuse recorded by authorities in the year. The problem is much bigger than shown in official statistics, as most crimes are not disclosed and/or reported.

Most sexual abuse isn't reported, detected or prosecuted. Most children don't tell anyone that they're being sexually abused. It's a crime that is usually only witnessed by the abuser and the victim. The NSPCC reports that

- 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused
- Over 2,200 children were identified as needing protection from sexual abuse in 2019/20
- 1 in 3 children sexually abused by an adult did not tell anyone
- Over 90% of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew
- Around a third of sexual abuse is committed by other children and young people.
- The NSPCC helpline responded to nearly 7,000 contacts about sexual abuse in 2019/20
- 13% of contacts to the NSPCC's helpline last year were concerns about sexual abuse
- Over 47,000 sexual offences against children were recorded in the UK in 2019/20

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/sexual-abuse-facts-statistics/>

## **Some of the following signs may be indicators of sexual abuse**

Children who are sexually abused may:

### *Stay away from certain people*

- they might avoid being alone with people, such as family members or friends
- they could seem frightened of a person or reluctant to socialise with them.

### *Show sexual behaviour that's inappropriate for their age*

- a child might become sexually active at a young age
- they might be promiscuous
- they could use sexual language or know information that you wouldn't expect them to.

### *Have physical symptoms*

- anal or vaginal soreness
- an unusual discharge
- sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- pregnancy.

## Things you may notice

If you're worried that a child is being abused, watch out for any unusual behaviour.

- withdrawn
- suddenly behaves differently
- anxious
- clingy
- depressed
- aggressive
- problems sleeping
- eating disorders
- wets the bed
- soils clothes
- takes risks
- misses school
- changes in eating habits
- obsessive behaviour
- nightmares
- drugs
- alcohol
- self-harm
- thoughts about suicide

### **Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges**

The Department for Education (DfE) first published guidance on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment between children in schools and colleges, in December 2017. The guidance was extensively updated following a DfE consultation, and the Ofsted review into sexual abuse in schools triggered by the Everyone's Invited movement. Part 5 of Keeping Children Safe in Education (September 2021) focuses on child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment which means that schools and colleges in England must have regard to it when carrying out their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Sexual violence and sexual harassment can occur between two children of **any age and sex**. It can also occur through a group of children sexually assaulting or sexually harassing a single child or group of children.

- Ofsted's Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse is for children and young people and that the issues are so widespread that they need addressing for all children and young people.
- Nationally collected statistics show that there has been a sharp increase in reporting of child sexual abuse to the police in recent years. Figures that include all child sexual abuse cases show that the police recorded over 83,000 child sexual abuse offences (including obscene publications) in the year ending March 2020.

- In the year ending March 2019, the police recorded 73,260 sexual offences where there are data to identify the victim was a child. Around one-quarter (27%) of these were rape offences.
- Police recorded crime data (England and Wales) for year ending March 2020 indicated that 51.9% of female victims and 62.4% of male victims of sexual offences were aged between 5 and 19.
- NSPCC’s how safe are our children report 2020 found that girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, accounting for around 90% of victims of recorded rape offences against 13- to 15-year-olds in England, Wales and Scotland.

### What school staff should do if they have concerns about a child

If staff members have any **concerns** about a child they will need to decide what action to take.

Any concern about a child should **always** trigger a conversation with the designated safeguarding lead to agree a course of action, although any staff member can make a referral to children’s social care.

### Additional guidance and further reading

- **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**  
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/>
- **Someone to lean on** Advice for professionals giving therapeutic support to children who have been sexually abused
- The **NSPCC Helpline** is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2023)
- **Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges** (September 2021)
- **What to Do If You’re Worried a Child Is Being Abused** (2015)
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (July 2018)
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (October 2021)
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board**  
<http://www.escb.org.uk/>  
Includes a link to the **SET procedures (Southend, Essex, Thurrock Child Protection Procedures)**
- **Childline**  
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111
- **No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse (NSPCC)**

## **Someone to lean on – advice for professionals giving therapeutic support to children who have been sexually abused**

The guide has been put together by NSPCC staff involved in the Letting the Future In therapeutic programme. This programme is based on a comprehensive evidence review, practice experience, and the views of adult and child survivors of sexual abuse. Here are some of the tips that will help staff support a child who has been sexually abused.

### **Tip 1 - Keep your support child-centred**

- Be prepared to listen. Don't assume all experiences are the same. You haven't heard it all before.
- Include children in making the decisions that affect them and be open.
- Confidence and trust need to be built first. Don't expect children and young people to want to talk about their abuse.
- Children don't always respond to direct questions and may not have the words to describe what was done to them or the impact it had.

### **Tip 2 - The bond you form with each child is key to their recovery**

- Don't promise what you can't deliver. But, you can instil a sense of hope and optimism. You want them to feel she or he “can help me with this”.
- Ensure the child knows they are believed and that you've followed up on what they've told you. They need assurance they will be protected.

### **Tip 3 - Help carers feel supported and understood**

- Parents react in different ways to the abuse of their child, be it denial, anger, guilt or depression. This can affect their ability to support those who need them most.
- Be positive about the potential for children to recover and their essential role now and in the future when therapy ends.

### **Tip 4 - Understand and use the child's support network**

- Identify roles and responsibilities of all professionals. Child protection concerns need to be shared and addressed in a timely manner.
- Quickly implement home safety plans and school safety plans – if you don't know how to do these, then ask for advice and support.

### **Tip 5 - Your own welfare as a practitioner is important**

- Professionals need to look after themselves when working with sexual abuse. Even if you're a qualified social worker, you'll come across things you haven't seen before. Good supervision and peer support is vital.
- Don't be afraid to say you feel stuck and to ask for advice from peers or others in a position to advise.