



Home Office

Protecting Children from Sexual Abuse

This information is provided as part of the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme, also known as “Sarah’s Law”. This guidance is designed to give you practical information to help you understand how child sexual abuse can happen, and what you can do to help protect your child or a child close to you from harm.

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Introduction

Many people feel that they already hear more than they want to about child sexual abuse, and hearing about these crimes, in the media and in the community, can be extremely upsetting.

Often the TV, radio and newspapers cover stories about children who are abused, abducted and even murdered, usually by strangers, but it is important to know that these are not typical crimes. Sexual abuse is more often perpetrated by people who are known to the child. People who abuse children are often very skilled at building trust, both with the child and with their parents, carers, and friends. Abuse may take place for years with no-one being aware of it. The internet can also provide opportunities for people to contact children in order to groom a child for abuse – both online and offline.

There is usually a lot of secrecy surrounding child sexual abuse, and often children will feel unable to tell anyone about the abuse when it is happening.¹ This is why it is important for the adults around a child to be aware of the signs and indicators of child sexual abuse and how to keep children safe.

Most people want to protect children from such abuse. Recognising sexually abusive behaviour is not always easy because we may not know what we are looking for, and it can be hard to believe that someone we may love or trust could behave abusively. Sometimes our suspicions are so disturbing that we push them out of our minds.

You may be concerned about someone who has contact (this could be online, offline or both) with your child or a child close to you, and it is important that you know the right steps to take to raise your concerns and take the appropriate measures to keep that child safe.

This guidance is designed to give you practical information to help you understand how abusers and potential abusers operate, how you can identify the signs of grooming and child sexual abuse, and what you can do to help protect your child or a child close to you from harm.

¹ Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse (2022). 'June 2016-October 2021 Dashboard'. *Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse Truth Project*. Available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/31164/view/truth-project-dashboard-final-2022.pdf.

What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities. The activities may involve physical contact, non-contact activities, or take place online.

Contact activity includes:

- assault by penetration, putting objects or body parts inside the child's mouth or body;
- masturbation, inciting a child to touch themselves sexually;
- kissing;
- rubbing; and
- touching outside of clothing.

Non-contact activity includes:

- showing sexual images to a child;
- deliberately exposing an adult's genitals to a child;
- taking indecent images of a child;
- encouraging a child to take indecent and inappropriate images of themselves or others;
- encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways; and
- grooming a child in preparation for abuse.

Online child sexual abuse

Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Child sexual offenders can use the internet in a number of ways to abuse children, including:

- contacting children and using the internet to groom them;
- encouraging children to send indecent images or perform sexual acts via a webcam;
- arranging to meet a child in person to abuse them; and
- downloading, viewing and/or sharing indecent images of children with other people online.

Who sexually abuses children?

More than two thirds of children who are sexually abused know their abuser.² This means that sexual abusers are likely to be people we know and could well be people we care about. Some abusers will seek out employment or voluntary work which brings them into contact with children. Some abusers will hold positions of trust which can help to convince other people that they are beyond reproach, making it hard for people to raise their concerns. People who abuse children online are adept at building relationships with children quickly, so children may feel they 'know' and trust them.

Whilst it is more common to hear about male abusers, women can also sexually abuse children. Some young people are also capable of sexually abusing other children. This is an especially difficult issue to deal with, partly because it is hard for us to think of children doing such things, but also because it is not always easy to tell the difference between normal sexual behaviour and harmful sexual behaviour. Information on children's sexual development can be found on the [NSPCC's website](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/sexual-behaviour-children/): www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/sex-relationships/sexual-behaviour-children/

Abusers come from all classes, racial and religious backgrounds, and sexual orientations. Some people who abuse children have adult sexual relationships and are not solely sexually interested in children.

² Children's Commissioner (2015). 'Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action'. Available at: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Protecting-children-from-harm-full-report.pdf.

How does abuse take place?

By accessing a child: People who abuse children often build a relationship with the child and the caring adults who want to protect them. Many are good at making “friends” with children and with those who are close to them.

Some may befriend parents who are facing difficulties or who are alone. They may offer to babysit or offer support with childcare and other responsibilities. Some seek trusted positions in the community which put them in contact with children, taking up roles in childcare, schools, children’s groups, and sports teams.

Some visit places such as arcades, playgrounds, parks, swimming baths and around schools where they can get to know children. Some use the internet to contact children, including through chat rooms, social networking sites, interactive gaming sites, and other websites and online forums that children use. Child abduction is very rare and makes up a very small minority of all reported offences.

Whether online or offline, people who abuse children will exploit any vulnerabilities that a child (and, in some cases, their family or carer) may have.

By silencing the child: Once abusers have accessed a child, they will often start grooming not only the child but also the adults around that child in order to make it extremely difficult for the child to either tell someone about the abuse or for an adult to suspect them.

Giving gifts, encouraging a child to keep secrets, making threats, blackmail, developing a “special” relationship, and flattery are all grooming techniques that are used by abusers, including those who groom children online.

They may make the child afraid of being hurt physically, but more usually the threat is about what may happen if they tell someone what is going on: for example, the family breaking up or the abuser going to prison, or simply that they will get into trouble themselves. To keep the abuse secret, the abuser will often play on the child’s fear, embarrassment, or guilt about what is happening, perhaps convincing them that no one will believe them if they do tell someone. Sometimes the abuser will make the child believe that he or she enjoyed the abuse and wanted it to happen. Very young or disabled children or those with special educational needs may lack the words or means of communication to let people know what is going on. There may be other reasons why a child stays silent and doesn’t tell.

If a child is being groomed online, there may be additional pressures that an abuser will bring to bear, such as threats that their information, secrets or images will be shared over the internet and with their friends or parents.

Recognising the signs of abuse

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for changes in their behaviour but, if we notice common signs, it may be time to call for help or advice. Some children may demonstrate many indicators of abuse, while some may not show any, so it is important to always keep an open mind. Some of the signs you might notice include (but are not limited to):

- acting in an inappropriate sexual way with toys, objects, animals, or other children;
- using inappropriate, sexualised language;
- nightmares and sleeping problems;
- becoming withdrawn or very clingy;
- personality changes or suddenly seeming insecure;
- regressing to younger behaviours, e.g., bedwetting or thumb-sucking;
- new or unaccountable fear of particular places or people;
- rejecting/avoiding intimacy or closeness;
- resisting or becoming distressed with intimate care (e.g., nappy changing) or undressing at bath/bedtime, for swimming, etc;
- outbursts of anger;
- substance abuse or self-harm;
- changes in eating habits;
- changes in personal hygiene habits;
- physical signs, such as unexplained soreness or bruises around the genitals, sexually transmitted infections, or pregnancy;
- becoming secretive;
- an increase in use of or secrecy around their use of the internet;
- receiving gifts that they are unwilling to explain

This list is by no means exhaustive, as children may exhibit different signs. You can find out more about the signs and indicators of abuse on the Centre of Expertise on child sexual abuse website: www.csacentre.org.uk/knowledge-in-practice/practice-improvement/signs-indicators-template

What to look out for in those around children

There may be cause for concern about the behaviour of an adult or young person if they:

- insist on physical affection such as kissing, hugging, or wrestling, even when the child clearly does not want it;
- are overly interested in the sexual development of a child or teenager;
- insist on time alone with a child with no interruptions;
- spend most of their spare time with children and have little interest in spending time with people their own age;
- regularly offer to babysit children for free or take children on overnight outings alone;
- buy children expensive gifts or give them money for no apparent reason;
- frequently walk in on children/teenagers in the bathroom;
- refuse to allow a child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters;
- treat a particular child as a favourite, making them feel “special” compared with others in the family; and/or
- attempting to interrupt the relationship between the child and a parent/carer (e.g., by undermining them, putting them down or “taking over” the parental role).

This list is by no means exhaustive, as some abusers may exhibit different behaviours. If you have concerns about someone’s behaviour towards a child, it is important that you don’t ignore them. More information for adults worried about the sexual behaviour towards children of people they know can be found at www.stopitnow.org.uk

How to keep children safe

The most important thing you can do is to be vigilant around those who have access to your child or children, in both the online and offline world, and to keep an open dialogue with your child, as this will help them to tell you if they are worried about anything that is happening or has happened to them.

Talk to your child and listen to what they have to say and know what they are doing, where they are going and who they are talking to, including when they are on the internet. People who sexually abuse children rely on secrecy.

Having regular talks about relationships, sex, and consent in an age-appropriate way with your child can help protect them from sexual abuse. Try to avoid any dramatic “we need to talk” statements - think about a time when you’re both comfortable, and you can bring the subject up naturally, like watching TV or on a walk. Ask about their lives and learn about their online and offline habits. Use open questions that can’t be answered with “yes” or “no”. It is important to try not to rush to a negative judgement of what your child is saying. Remember, you want your child to know they can tell you what is happening. More information on how to approach these conversations can be found on the Centre of Expertise on child sexual abuse website:

www.csacentre.org.uk/knowledge-in-practice/practice-improvement/communicating-with-children-guide/

Encourage your child not to keep secrets – children should not be asked to keep secrets by adults and should always feel able to tell someone if they’ve been asked to keep a secret, with the understanding that they wouldn’t then get in trouble for doing so.

The more difficult we make it for abusers to come between children and parents or carers, the better protected children will be. You can help your child identify someone else they can talk to if they are worried about talking to you, such as a friend, family member, or a school staff member.

Share your knowledge and experience of relationships. For example, sometimes people seem nice at first and then they turn out to be mean. Let them know that you know this, that they can talk to you about it, and that you won’t panic or punish them if they do.

Demonstrate to children that it is OK to say “no”. We need to teach children when it is OK to say “no”, and we should not insist they do something they do not want to do; for example, when they do not want to play or be tickled, hugged, or kissed. We also need to help them understand what behaviour is unacceptable or inappropriate, and

that they should tell us or another trusted adult if someone is behaving in a way that worries them. Sometimes the abuser is a close family member.

Help your child to understand that strangers online are still strangers and that they need to keep their personal information private. Help them develop a healthy suspicion of whether people are who they say they are. Help them understand that it is not safe to meet someone in person who they first met online and, if someone asks them to meet, they should tell a trusted adult. The Safer Internet Centre has published guidance on how to stay safe on the internet, including information on how to manage children's access to technology: www.saferinternet.org.uk

Educating children is not only thing that we need to do to keep them safe. Take sensible precautions when choosing childcare or activities outside of school and find out as much as possible about babysitters and those who run groups, classes, or tutoring. Do not leave children with anyone you have reservations about. If a child is unhappy about being cared for by a particular adult, talk to the child about the reasons for this.

There are things we can all do to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Sometimes a person outside the child's immediate family has a clearer view of what is going on than those more closely involved. Above anything, if you are worried that someone you know has a sexual interest in a child, seek help from the police, children's services or from the agencies detailed below.

Where to go for help

The police and children's services have joint working arrangements for responding to suspected child sexual abuse. Someone will talk to you about your concerns and may ask for details so the situation can be investigated further. Police officers and social workers are very experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with the child and family.

If you are concerned about an individual's behaviour towards a child that they have direct access to, you can approach the police for information about that individual through the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme, also known as "Sarah's Law". If there is any information held on that individual that raises concerns about their suitability to be around children, the police may either disclose that information to the parents, carers, or guardians of that child, and/or help them implement measures to protect that child from possible abuse. You can find more information on the scheme here: www.gov.uk/police-check-someone-involved-with-child

If you are worried about someone's behaviour towards a child, you can contact:

1. Local Police

If a child is in immediate danger, call 999. For non-emergency support, you can visit your local police station in person, visit your local force website, or call 101. You can find your local police force website here:

www.police.uk/pu/contact-the-police/uk-police-forces

2. Children's Services

You can also get in touch with your local children's social care team at www.gov.uk/report-child-abuse-to-local-council Contact details can also be found in your local telephone directory.

3. Contact the **NSPCC Child Protection Helpline** - 0808 800 5000

The NSPCC is the UK's leading charity dedicated to stopping child abuse. You can contact their child protection helpline on 0808 800 5000 or via email at help@nspcc.org.uk (or talk@nspcc.org.uk if you are emailing from Northern Ireland). You can find more information here: www.nspcc.org.uk

4. **Stop it Now! UK and Ireland Helpline** - 0808 1000 900

This is a confidential helpline for adults worried about the sexual behaviour of people they know towards children, including parents and carers worried about the sexual behaviour of their children. The helpline also engages with those worried about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children, as well as with professionals needing help with difficult cases. The Helpline operates from 9am-9pm Monday-Thursday and from 9am- 5pm on Friday. They also offer an online chat and email service. More information can also be found on www.stopitnow.org.uk and www.parentsprotect.co.uk

Further advice and support

- [Parents Protect](http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk) - Parents Protect helps parents and carers protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation by providing child safety resources. www.parentsprotect.co.uk
- [CEOP](http://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre) – The Child Exploitation and Online Protection command (CEOP) is a law enforcement agency to help keep children and young people safe from sexual abuse and grooming online. www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre
- [Thinkuknow](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents) - Provides information for parents and carers concerned about children sexual abuse, as well as age-appropriate online safety resources for children. www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents
- [Barnardo's](http://www.barnardos.org.uk) – Barnardo's supports children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse, to make them safe and help them recover. www.barnardos.org.uk
- [Stop Abuse Together](http://www.stopabusettogether.campaign.gov.uk) – This website contains information and links for anyone concerned about child sexual abuse. www.stopabusettogether.campaign.gov.uk
- [Marie Collins Foundation](http://www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk) – The Marie Collins Foundation is a charity that works directly with children, young people and families to enable their recovery following sexual abuse involving technology. www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk
- [UK Safer Internet Centre](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk) has published extensive guidance on how to stay safe on the internet. They have advice for children, parents, and teachers. www.saferinternet.org.uk
- [Childline](http://www.childline.org.uk) – Children and young people can contact Childline at any time day or night to speak to someone about their concerns. www.childline.org.uk