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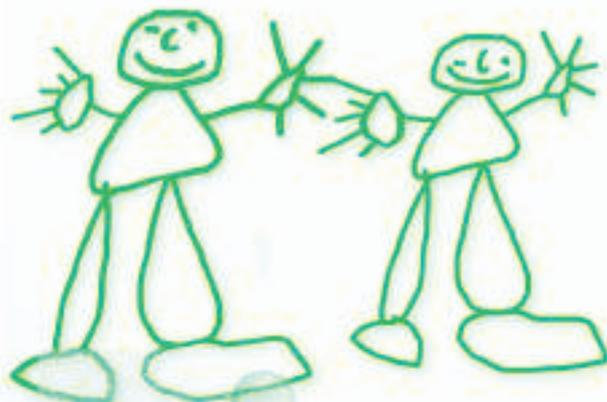
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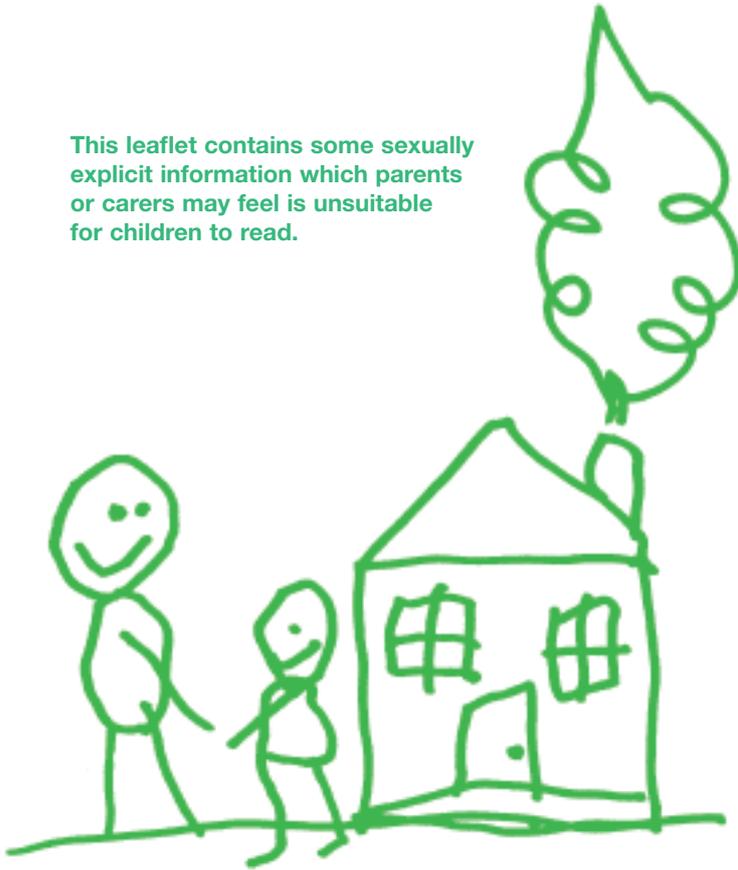
# Protecting children from sexual abuse

**A guide for parents and carers**



**NSPCC**   
**Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.**

**This leaflet contains some sexually explicit information which parents or carers may feel is unsuitable for children to read.**



Parents and carers often worry that their children may be sexually abused by someone living in the local community. Despite what many people think, most sexual abuse of children is carried out by someone well known to the child, including relatives and family friends. Children and young people can also behave in sexually harmful ways towards each other.

This booklet gives simple information and advice to help you keep your children safe from sexual abuse.

If you already know, or suspect that your child is being abused, you'll find straightforward, clear advice to help you deal with the situation.

There is also advice for anyone who thinks they are abusing a child, or is concerned that they might do so. The table on page four lists behaviour towards children that is sexually abusive.

**It is important to remember that most children grow up without experiencing abuse.**

# What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is when someone uses a child for his or her own sexual pleasure and gratification. An abuser may be a man or woman, or another child or adolescent. Both boys and girls can be abused, and sometimes from an early age.

## Sexual abuse of children includes:

- sexual touching of any part of the body, clothed or unclothed, including using an object
- all penetrative sex, including penetration of the mouth with an object or part of the body
- encouraging a child to engage in sexual activity, including sexual acts with someone else, or making a child strip or masturbate
- intentionally engaging in sexual activity in front of a child or not taking proper measures to prevent a child being exposed to sexual activity by others
- meeting a child following sexual grooming, or preparation, with the intention of abusing them
- taking, making, permitting to take, distributing, showing or advertising indecent images of children
- paying for the sexual services of a child or encouraging them into prostitution or pornography
- showing a child images of sexual activity including photographs, videos or via webcams.

# Some points to remember

- Research shows that children are more likely to be sexually abused by someone they know, including relatives, family friends and people in positions of trust, than by a stranger.
- Children often have very confused feelings about being abused by someone they trust to protect them. They may not always realise that what is being done to them is abuse.
- Children do not always tell about abuse. Children should be taken seriously when they do tell about abuse.
- Abuse can continue for years, and sometimes into adulthood.
- Sexual abuse can have very damaging effects on a child, which can last into adulthood. However, for many children the effects may be relatively short-term, depending on the individual child, the nature of the abuse and the help they receive. How adults respond to children when they tell them about abuse can be a very important factor in how seriously they are affected in the long term.
- If you have concerns about your child, or any child, and sexual abuse you need to seek professional help.
- Help is available to deal with sexually abusive behaviour.

## What kind of people sexually abuse children?

It is impossible to describe a typical sexual abuser or paedophile. They do not look different to other people and they behave in a variety of ways. They are found in all areas of society and can come from any professional, racial or religious background. They sometimes hold influential positions, appearing to be well-respected members of society. They may be abusing their own children as well as children within the wider community.

Those who abuse children within their own families can include fathers, live-in partners, step-fathers, boyfriends, brothers, uncles, male cousins, grandfathers and father figures. Abusers can also be a similarly wide range of female relatives, including mothers.

Contrary to the popular image, people who sexually abuse children often appear kind, concerned and caring towards children. This is part of building a close relationship with children, which allows them to abuse without being suspected or discovered.

Many also convince themselves that they are doing no harm to the child.

## How do people who sexually abuse children behave?

People who sexually abuse children can go to great lengths to get close to children to gain their trust. Within families, this kind of behaviour may not appear unusual. They can also put children under great pressure to keep the abuse secret.

### Targeting children

Abusers may target only girls or boys, or both sexes; they may prefer children of a particular age or they may be a risk to all children. In family situations they sometimes encourage brothers and sisters to compete for their attention. They may single out a particular child for special attention or treats to create opportunities for them to abuse. In some cases, the child who is being abused may be treated particularly harshly by the abuser and be seen as the family scapegoat.



## Grooming children

Grooming is a term used to describe what happens when an abuser builds up a relationship with a child with a view to abusing them at some stage. There is no set pattern in relation to the grooming of children. For some abusers there will be a lengthy period of time before the abuse begins. The child may be given special attention and what starts as an apparently normal display of affection, such as cuddling, can develop into sexual touching or masturbation and then into more serious sexual behaviour. Other abusers may draw a child in and abuse them relatively quickly. Some abusers don't groom children but abuse them without forming a relationship at all.

Grooming can take place in any setting where a relationship is formed, such as leisure, music, sports and religious activities, or in internet chatrooms. Communication begun in an internet chatroom can move very quickly to mobile phones.

## Becoming part of the family

Sometimes an abuser will build up a close relationship with a family through friendship or marriage. They may befriend hard-pressed parents who are having difficulties coping with their children. Single-parent families are particularly at risk of this kind of approach. The abuser may offer much-needed support, perhaps starting a relationship with the parent or carer so that they can become part of the family and move into the family home. They will then start to develop a close relationship with the child or children they want to abuse.

## Keeping the secret

The abuse will nearly always be carried out in great secrecy. Other adults in the family will probably not suspect that anything is wrong, including the other parent if their partner is the abuser. The child may also feel very confused and not know who to tell or what to tell them.

To keep the abuse secret, the abuser may use the child's natural fear, embarrassment or guilt about what has happened, as well as threats of punishment. They may say:

- “If you tell, Daddy will be taken away and it will break up the family.”
- “It's no use telling anyone - no-one will believe you” or “breathe a word to anyone and you're dead.”
- “It's the way little girls/boys love their daddies” to convince the child that what is happening is normal in families or to dissuade them from telling.

The abuser may threaten to hurt someone close to the child, for example a parent, sibling or even the family pet.

They often make a child believe that he or she is somehow responsible for the abuse happening or continuing.

## What is the risk from the internet and mobile phones?

The internet and mobile phones provide young people with exciting ways to gather information and to communicate with each other. There are two main areas of risk though: unsuitable contacts and unsuitable content.

Chatrooms are popular with children and young people but also with abusers looking for victims. Sexual abusers often enter a chatroom posing as a child or young person, strike up a relationship with a child and then arrange to meet up with a view to abusing them.

The vast majority of internet content is useful and well intentioned, but it is easy to find information and images that are unsuitable for children. These can include pornography, or material that is violent, racist, inaccurate or harmful in some way. There is also material that is clearly illegal, such as images of child abuse.

You can help protect your child by talking to them about the risks of using the internet and mobile phones, including giving too much information about themselves to people they meet online. You can also take some practical steps like installing protective software on your computer that will filter out unsuitable content.

Further internet safety advice is available from [www.parentscentre.gov.uk/usingcomputersandtheinternet](http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/usingcomputersandtheinternet) (for parents and carers) and [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk) (for children and young people). If you come across illegal content on the internet you should report this to the Internet Watch Foundation: [www.iwf.org.uk](http://www.iwf.org.uk) or the Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre (CEOP) [www.ceop.gov.uk](http://www.ceop.gov.uk)

## How can I keep my child safe?

**Help your child understand about sex,** about his or her body and about what is sexually healthy. Talking about this may be a little difficult at first, but it can play an important part in protecting your child against abuse and developing your relationship with your child. For example, your child needs to understand about private parts of their body in order to understand what is appropriate touching and what is not. Be as positive as possible - children should feel proud of their bodies and not ashamed. They also need to know that their bodies belong to them alone. These conversations are a normal part of parenting.

**Talk to your child about sexual matters.** Young children quickly start to pick up sexual information from other children once they begin school. This information is often inaccurate and expressed in crude language. So it may be a good idea for you to tell your child first, from whatever age he or she begins asking questions, or earlier if you think it appropriate. What's more, you may find it easier to talk to your child at this age than when they are older, particularly as they approach adolescence. It is important that you also know what is appropriate sexual behaviour as children grow older and become adolescents (see pages 15-16).

**Help with sex education.** Talking about sexual matters is normal but if you feel embarrassed, your health visitor or doctor should be happy to advise you. Ask your health visitor or health clinic whether there is a local parenting group you could join or if other sources of advice are available. There are also good books in local libraries and bookshops.

You may also receive a letter from your child's school about the sex education now available in schools from primary age onwards. Why not ask your child's teacher for advice about talking to your child at home? He or she may be able to suggest some helpful reading material that you and your child can look at together.

**Build an open and trusting relationship with your children** from when they are very young. Always listen carefully to their fears and concerns and respond sensitively. They may be trying to understand what they can talk to you about.

**Explain the difference between good and bad secrets.** Help your child understand that it's OK to have a secret about something like a surprise birthday party, but not about things that make them feel unhappy or uncomfortable.

### Most important of all

**Teach your child they have the right** to refuse to do anything they feel is wrong or that frightens them. Stress that they should not hesitate to tell you or another adult if something happens that they don't like.



## The answers to some of your questions

### What about sexual exploration between children in the family?

Sexualised play between children is a normal part of growing up. But sometimes sexual behaviour between children can become abusive, particularly where there is an age gap between the children. Talking to children about appropriate sexual behaviour is also a normal part of parenting.

Below are some examples of normal and healthy sexual behaviour\*:

#### Pre-school children (0 to five years) commonly:

- use childish sexual language to talk about body parts
- ask how babies are made and where they come from
- touch or rub their own genitals
- show and look at private body parts.

#### They rarely:

- discuss sexual acts or use sexually explicit language
- have physical sexual contact with other children
- show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge.

#### School-age children (six to 12 years) commonly:

- ask questions about menstruation, pregnancy and sexual behaviour
- experiment with other children, often during games, kissing, touching, showing and role-playing eg, mums and dads or doctors and nurses

- masturbate in private
- older children in this age range are also more likely than pre-school children to use sexual words and discuss sexual acts, particularly with their friends.

### They rarely

- masturbate in public
- show adult-like sexual behaviour or knowledge.

### Adolescents (13 to 16 years old) commonly

- ask questions about relationships and sexual behaviour
- use sexual language and talk about sexual acts between themselves
- masturbate in private
- experiment sexually with adolescents of a similar age.  
*NB about one-third of adolescents have sexual intercourse before the age of 16.*

### They rarely

- masturbate in public
- have sexual contact with much younger children or adults.

If you are concerned that sexual abuse is taking place, seek professional advice from your local social services department, the police or phone the NSPCC Helpline. You must protect children by stopping the abuse.

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### What about bathing and touching my child?

Growing awareness of the problem of sexual abuse of children causes some parents to ask whether fathers or step-fathers should bathe their children. Some ask whether parents should cuddle their children.

The answer is yes - these activities are a normal part of family life, unlike the abusive behaviours listed on page 4.

Children depend on their parents for physical care, security and love. It is right and natural for parents to clothe, feed and wash their children; also to cuddle, hug, kiss and stroke them when showing love and affection. Of course, as children grow older their feelings towards displays of affection will change. So what is important is that you listen to your child and respect their wishes at every stage.

### I was abused as a child by a member of my family, but wasn't able to tell anyone. I'm worried the same thing may happen to my younger brothers and sisters. What can I do?

Younger brothers and sisters living at home may be at risk. It is important that you seek help to protect them. You should contact your local children's services department or police. You can also call the NSPCC Helpline.

It is also important that you are able to talk to someone about the abuse you suffered. A list of organisations that can help is given at the end of this booklet.

### How do I know if someone is likely to abuse my child?

There is no easy answer to this question. But you should be alert to anyone who pays an unusual amount of attention to your child, for example:

- giving your child gifts, toys or favours
- offering to take your child on trips, outings and holidays
- seeking opportunities to be alone with your child.

Always carry out a careful check on anyone who is to have unsupervised contact with your child. Find out as much as you can about babysitters and those you ask or those who offer to look after your child. Ask crèches and activity groups about what checks are made on staff and volunteers and about their policies for protecting children. Don't leave your child with anyone you feel uncomfortable about. Don't use unregistered childminders or foster parents.

Some employers, such as schools or youth clubs, carry out checks with the Criminal Records Bureau on people who apply for jobs involving unsupervised contact with children. These checks will tell an employer if someone has a criminal conviction that makes them inappropriate to work with children, but many people who sexually abuse children have not been identified or convicted. It is important that parents and carers look out for signs of worrying behaviour from any adult or teenager looking after their child.

### How will I know if my child is being abused?

When abuse is discovered, parents often say there were no obvious signs to make them suspect that their child was being sexually abused, even when the abuser was their partner.

However, sometimes a child who is being abused will show the following types of behaviour. He or she may:

- start to avoid being alone with a particular family member
- show unexpected fear of an adult or be reluctant to socialise with them
- try to tell you about the abuse indirectly, through hints or clues. For example, they may talk about being asked to keep a secret or ask anxious questions about the family being broken up or daddy being taken away
- describe behaviour by an adult that suggests your child is being groomed for future abuse
- start to behave aggressively, or to have sleep problems or to wet the bed
- refuse to attend school or suddenly lose concentration and start performing badly at school
- display sexually inappropriate behaviour, including use of sexual language and sexual information which you would not expect them to know
- appear depressed, withdrawn or complain about physical ailments that don't have a medical explanation
- have physical symptoms to suggest sexual abuse - these can include anal or vaginal soreness or an unusual discharge.

However, the above behaviour does not necessarily mean that your child is being abused. There may be other explanations. If you are worried, talk to your child.



### What should I do if I suspect or discover that someone has sexually abused my child?

You must get professional advice about protecting your child before you take any action. Confronting the alleged abuser may give him or her the opportunity to silence, confuse or threaten your child about speaking about the abuse. It may also place your child in immediate danger. Make sure you get advice first by:

- contacting your local police or children's services department
- contacting the NSPCC Helpline.

You may also want to talk through your feelings of shock, disbelief or anger with a trusted relative or friend. However, **you must still get professional advice** about protecting your child.

**It is vital that the sexual abuse stops.** This must be your first priority, however painful the consequences may be for you, your partner and your family. The abuser's behaviour is unlawful. It is unlikely to stop unless you take action to protect your child and the abuser receives help. Your child may also need medical attention and counselling.

### If the abuser is my husband or partner, could my family be broken up and my children taken away from me?

This will depend on whether a criminal charge is brought against the abuser, and if there is a conviction, or if the court decides that your child needs to be in the care of the local authority. Priority must be given to your child's long-term safety and well-being. In most cases it is the abuser, rather than the child, who is removed from the family home. What is important is that you act to keep your child safe and you do your best to meet their emotional needs.

### **How should I react if my child tells me that he or she has been sexually abused?**

You will naturally feel very upset, but it is important that you do not react in a way that will add to your child's distress.

**You child needs to know** that he or she is not to blame.

**Make it clear** that you do not doubt what he or she says.

**Allow your child to talk** about what has happened, but do not force him or her to do so.

**Tell your child that he or she has done the right thing** in telling you. Don't blame him or her if the abuse occurred because he or she disobeyed your instructions, for example, going out without your permission. They may also need to hear you tell them that you love them.

You may feel very confused, particularly if the abuser is a relative. You may want help in coping with powerful and conflicting emotions about the abuse. These could include shock, anger, disbelief, self-blame and fear.

Do not seek to confront the abuser yourself.

Make sure you receive expert support by contacting the NSPCC Helpline. You can find contact details for the NSPCC Helpline and other organisations, which include support groups who can connect you with appropriate help, on page 25.

### **What should I do if I am sexually abusing a child or am worried about my feelings towards a child?**

If you are involving a child in any of the behaviours listed on page four, then you are sexually abusing a child.

What you are doing is wrong, harmful to the child, against the law, and it must stop. You are unlikely to stop this behaviour until you acknowledge that it is wrong, and you are helped to understand and control your behaviour.

What you are doing could have extremely damaging effects on the child, which may last into adulthood.

You may have believed that the child consented to what you are doing. Though it may be hard for you to accept, this is not the case. Children cannot consent to sexual contact with an adult.

You may have promised to yourself that you will stop, but find it difficult to do so alone.

You may not have abused yet, but are concerned that you will. If you are developing sexual feelings towards a child, you must seek advice to prevent you acting on these feelings.

For your own sake, and that of the children and young people concerned, contact Stop it Now! an organisation that provides advice to abusers and potential abusers and their families and friends. You can also contact the NSPCC Helpline, your local police or children's services department. For NSPCC contact details see page 25.



## Advice and information services

### On preventing child sexual abuse:

#### **NSPCC**

Weston House  
42 Curtain Road  
London  
EC2A 3NH  
Helpline: 0808 800 5000  
Textphone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing:  
0800 056 0566  
Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk), [talk@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:talk@nspcc.org.uk) (NI only)  
Website: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

We also offer helplines in five Asian languages and Welsh:  
NSPCC Asian Helpline  
(Mon-Fri 10am-6pm): 0800 196 7719  
NSPCC Cymru/ Wales Helpline  
(Mon-Fri 10am-6pm): 0808 100 2524

#### **Stop it Now! UK & Ireland**

PO Box 9841  
Birmingham  
B48 7WB  
Helpline: 0808 1000 900  
Email: [help@stopitnow.org.uk](mailto:help@stopitnow.org.uk)  
Website: [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

### **ChildLine**

Freepost NATN1111  
London  
E1 6BR  
Helpline: 0800 1111  
Website: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

You can find contact details for your local police (under 'police') and children's services department (under 'children's services') in your telephone directory or other local community directory.

### **For advice on sex education:**

#### **Sex Education Forum**

National Children's Bureau  
8 Wakley Street  
London  
EC1V 7QE  
Tel: 0207 843 1901  
Email: [sexedforum@ncb.org.uk](mailto:sexedforum@ncb.org.uk)  
Website: [www.ncb.org.uk/sef](http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef)

### **For parents and carers of children who have been sexually abused:**

#### **MOSAC (Mothers of Sexually Abused Children)**

141 Greenwich High Road  
London  
SE10 8JA  
Helpline: 0800 980 1958  
Website: [www.mosac.org.uk](http://www.mosac.org.uk)

### **For survivors of child sexual abuse:**

#### **Breaking Free**

Suite 23-25  
Marshall House  
124 Middleton Road  
Morden, Surrey  
SM4 6RW  
Helpline: 0208 648 3500

#### **Childwatch**

19 Spring Bank  
Hull  
HU3 1AF  
Helpline: 01482 325552  
Email: [info@childwatch.org.uk](mailto:info@childwatch.org.uk)  
Website: [www.childwatch.org.uk](http://www.childwatch.org.uk)

#### **NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood)**

c/o 42 Curtain Road  
London  
EC2A 3NH  
Helpline: 0800 085 3330 (See website for opening hours)  
Website: [www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)

#### **Survivors UK**

2 Leathermarket Street  
London SE1 3HN  
Helpline: 0845 1221201 (Mon, Tues and Thurs 7pm-10pm)  
Email: [info@survivorsuk.org.uk](mailto:info@survivorsuk.org.uk)  
Website: [www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)