



what we all need to know to  
**Protect our Children**

## Introduction

*Many people feel that they already hear more than they want to about child sexual abuse. TV, radio and newspapers seem to be full of horrific stories about children who are abused, abducted and even murdered, usually by strangers. The reality is that the stories that get the most media attention are not typical. So, how useful would this kind of information really be if we suspected that someone we knew well was sexually abusing a child or thinking about doing so?*

Child sexual abuse happens in secret and most victims tell no one. The abuser is usually a family friend, neighbour, a member of the child's family or someone working with children: he or she may be someone we know and love.

People who abuse children are often very skilled at building trust with the child and their parents or carers, and abuse may take place for years with no one being aware of it. Because children are rarely able to tell about abuse we, as adults, need to protect them. However, recognising the behaviour of people who sexually abuse children is not easy – either because we do not know what to look for or because our suspicions are so disturbing that we push them out of our minds.

This leaflet aims to provide the information we all need to recognise the warning signs of abuse and build the confidence to do something about it.

Stop it Now! believes that we can all meet the challenge of recognising the signs of abuse before it happens and take positive action to prevent it. **Most importantly of all, Stop it Now! calls on people who are abusing a child, or who are thinking about it, to recognise their behaviour as harmful and seek help.**

## Why do we need to know about child sexual abuse?

*It is only in recent years that we have come to appreciate the true scale of the sexual abuse of children. The secrecy surrounding child sexual abuse is evident in the fact that only a quarter of children who are sexually abused tell anyone about it. Of these, most tell a family member or friend. Hardly any come to the attention of police, social services or health professionals.*

In a major study recently conducted in the UK, 1 in 6 young adults said that they had been sexually abused before they reached the age of 16. It is no exaggeration to describe this as an epidemic, which causes serious harm to thousands of children every year.

The harm sexual abuse causes to children can be profound, not just to their emotional and physical development, but to their trust in adults, especially if their abuser is someone they love. The sooner abuse is identified, the sooner the healing process can begin for all concerned.

'When I was 14 I told my mother that my father was sexually abusing me but she didn't do anything. A year later I told my doctor. He said there was nothing he could do. If somebody had listened and helped me at the time my problems would have been halved. People knew what was happening to me but were too frightened to do anything. People have to feel confident to take action'

*Adult survivor of child sexual abuse*

We can protect children by learning how to be alert to warning signs in the behaviour of a would-be abuser and knowing what action to take. Sound information helps us recognise these signs and take action to stop dangerous behaviour in ourselves and people we know. Just as the campaign against drink driving has enabled us to challenge someone who is drinking and planning to drive, so information and advice can help us act if we suspect someone we know might be sexually interested in children.

### What is child sexual abuse?

#### **Child Sexual Abuse Includes Touching and Non-Touching Activity**

##### **Touching activity includes:**

- Touching a child's genitals or private parts for sexual pleasure;
- Making a child touch someone else's genitals, play sexual games or have sex;
- Putting objects or body parts (like fingers, tongue or penis) inside the vagina, in the mouth or in the anus of a child for sexual pleasure;

##### **Non-touching activity includes:**

- Showing pornography to a child;
- Deliberately exposing an adult's genitals to a child;
- Photographing a child in sexual poses;
- Encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts;
- Inappropriately watching a child undress or use the bathroom;

### What about child pornography?

As well as the activities described above, there is also the serious and growing problem of people making and downloading sexual images of children on the Internet. To view child pornography is to participate in the abuse of a child and those who do so may also be abusing children they know. People who look at this material need help to prevent their behaviour from becoming even more serious.

## Who sexually abuses children?

There is a growing understanding that sexual abusers are likely to be people we know, and could well be people we care about; after all more than 8 out of 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser. They are family members or friends, neighbours or babysitters – many hold responsible positions in society. Some people who abuse children have adult sexual relationships and are not solely, or even mainly, sexually interested in children. Abusers come from all classes, racial and religious backgrounds and may be homosexual or heterosexual. Most abusers are men, but some are women. You cannot pick an abuser out in a crowd.

‘He looks so ordinary and is great with kids. I’d have never recognised him as an abuser.’ (*Mother of 7-year-old boy abused by a neighbour*)

Many children are abused by other children or young people, often older than themselves. Unless the problem is recognised and help provided, a young person who abuses other children may continue abusing as an adult. More information about how to recognise worrying behaviour in children and teenagers and what to do about it is available from the Stop it Now! Helpline.

## Why do they do it?

It is not easy to understand how seemingly ordinary people can do such things to children. Some people who sexually abuse children recognise that it is wrong and are deeply unhappy about what they are doing. Others believe their behaviour is OK and that what they do shows their love for children. Some, but not all, have been abused themselves; others come from violent or unhappy family backgrounds. Knowing why people sexually abuse children does not excuse their behaviour, but it may help us understand what is happening.

If abusers face the reality of what they are doing and come forward, or if someone reports them, effective treatment programmes are available. These help people understand and control their behaviour, reducing risk to children and building a safer society. Knowing about the possibility of treatment for abusers helps children and families too.

‘It made it easier for me to tell, knowing there are places where people like my Dad can get help. I told because I wanted him to get help not just to see him punished.’ (17-year-old young woman)

## How do they do it?

### *By getting close to children:*

- People who want to 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 those who are close to them.
- Some may befriend parents who are facing difficulties, sometimes on their own. They may offer to baby-sit or offer support with childcare and other responsibilities.
- Some seek trusted positions in the community. They may look for jobs, which put them in contact with children, such as childcare, schools, children's groups and sports teams.
- Some find places where they can get to know children and so not be seen as dangerous strangers. In arcades, playgrounds, parks, swimming baths and around schools.

### *By silencing children:*

- People who abuse children may offer a combination of gifts or treats and threats about what will happen if the child says 'no' or tells someone. They may make the child afraid of being hurt physically, but more usually the threat is about what may happen if they tell e.g. the family breaking up or father going to prison.
- In order 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. Sometimes the abuser will make the child believe that he or she enjoyed it and wanted it to happen.
- There may be other reasons why a child stays silent and doesn't tell. Very young or disabled children may lack the words or means of communication to let people know what is going on.

## What stops us seeing abuse?

Many people have experienced someone close to them abusing a child. When something is so difficult to think about, it is only human to find ways of denying it to ourselves. One of the common thoughts that parents in this situation have is; 'My child would have told me if they were being abused and they haven't - so it can't be happening'.

Other things people have said to themselves to deny what is happening include:

- "He was the perfect father, he was involved with the children, he played with them, and when our daughter was ill he looked after her so well."
- "I thought they were just fooling around. He couldn't be abusing anyone at 14."
- "My brother would never do that to a child. He has a wife and children."
- "My friend has had a longstanding relationship with a woman. So how can he be interested in boys?"
- "She was their mother: how could she be abusing them?"
- "He told me about his past right from the start. He wouldn't have done that if he hadn't changed and I'd know if he'd done it again."

## What do we need to know?

*We need accurate information and facts to help us protect our children. The signs that an adult is using their relationship with a child for sexual reasons may not be obvious. We may feel uncomfortable about the way they play with the child, or seem always to be favouring them and creating reasons for them to be alone.*

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

- Refuse to allow a child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters.
- 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 baby-sit 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.
- Treat a particular child as a favourite, making them feel 'special' compared with others in the family.
- Pick on a particular child.

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for their behaviour, but if we notice a combination of worrying signs, it may be time to call for help or advice.

### What to watch out for in children:

- Acting out in an inappropriate sexual way with toys or objects.
- Nightmares, sleeping problems.
- Becoming withdrawn or very clingy.
- Personality changes, seeming insecure.
- Regressing to younger behaviours, e.g. bedwetting.
- Unaccountable fear of particular places or people.
- Outburst of anger.
- Changes in eating habits.
- Physical signs e.g. unexplained soreness or bruises around genitals, sexually-transmitted diseases.
- Becoming secretive.

### ***This all sounds very worrying – can't adults be safe with children?***

Yes, of course, most adults are safe. Physical affection is a vital part of bringing up children and should be positively encouraged. But the difference between genuine affection and abusive behaviour is not always clear. If we feel uneasy about the behaviour of an adult towards a child or children it is important to talk it over with someone we trust. The Stop it Now! Helpline can offer confidential advice – call 0808 1000 900

### **What can we do to prevent children being sexually abused?**

A safe relationship between adults and children is one in which secrets are hard to keep; where children would feel able to tell someone even if they hadn't been able to say 'no' to the abuse. People who want to abuse children avoid these situations. The more difficult we make it for abusers to come between children and parents or carers, the better-protected children will be.

Sometimes the abuser is a parent or another close family member. When that happens it's especially painful for the safe parent or other family members to face it and it's even harder for children to say 'no' and tell someone.

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.

In order to prevent child sexual abuse we need to:

1. Be aware of the warning signs that someone we know may have a sexual interest in children and seek help if we are worried.

Make sure we understand the signs contained in this booklet so that we are aware of what to look out for at an early stage. If we think someone we know has a sexual interest in or may be abusing a child, seek professional help. Don't keep it a secret.

2. Talk to children, and listen to what they have to say

People who sexually abuse children rely on secrecy. They try to silence children and to build trust with adults, counting on us to be silent if we have doubts. The first step to tackling this secrecy is to develop an open and trusting relationship with our children. This means listening carefully to their fears and concerns and letting them know they should not worry about telling us anything. It is important to talk with them about sex, and to be comfortable using the words they may need.

3. Demonstrate to children that it is all right to say 'no'

Teach children when it is OK to say 'no', for example when they do not want to play, or be tickled, hugged or kissed. Help them to understand what is unacceptable behaviour and that they must always tell us if someone is behaving in a way which worries them, even if they were unable to say no at the time.

4. Set and respect family boundaries

Make sure that all members of the family have rights to privacy in dressing, bathing, sleeping and other personal activities. Even young children should be listened to and their preferences respected.

5. Take sensible precautions about whom we choose to take care of our children

Be careful about who children are left with. Find out as much as we can about baby-sitters and don't leave our child with anyone we have reservations about. If our child is unhappy about being cared for by a particular adult, talk to the child about the reasons for this.

**What can we do if we suspect that someone we know is abusing a child or thinking about doing so?**

It is very disturbing to suspect someone we know of sexually abusing a child, especially if the person is a friend or a member of the family. It is so much easier to dismiss such thoughts and put them down to imagination. But it is better to talk over the situation with someone than to discover later that we were right to be worried. And remember, we are not alone. Thousands of people every year discover that someone in their family or circle of friends has abused a child. Children who are abused and their families need professional help to recover from their experience.

Action can lead to abuse being prevented, and children who are being abused receiving protection and help to recover. It can also lead to the abuser getting effective treatment to stop abusing and becoming a safer member of our community. If the abuser is someone close to us, we need to get support for ourselves too.

## **Action you can take:**

**Contact the Stop It Now!  
Helpline on 0808 1000 900**

If you are unsure or worried about the behaviour of someone you know, whether they are an adult or a child, our experienced advisors will talk over your worries with you and can offer confidential advice on what steps you could take.

## **Contact your local police and social services**

The police and social 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 and social services teams are very experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with the child and family. Remember, child sexual abuse is a crime and abusers may need to go to court before the abuse stops and they and the child get the help they need.

***Our children are our future and all of us have a responsibility to protect them. Take action. Call Stop it Now for further advice.***

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**STOP IT NOW! UK is supported by an alliance of the following organisations:**

**Barnardo's  
ChildLine  
The Lucy Faithfull Foundation  
NCH  
NOTA  
NSPCC  
West Midlands Police  
and representatives of government and statutory agencies.**

**For Confidential help and advice contact our  
FREEPHONE HELPLINE  
0808 1000 900**

or E-mail: [help@stopitnow.org.uk](mailto:help@stopitnow.org.uk)

Stop it Now! UK & Ireland Website - [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

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