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**No one noticed,  
no one heard:**

a study of disclosures  
of childhood abuse



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# Executive summary

This report describes the childhood experiences of abuse of 60 young men and women and how they disclosed this abuse and sought help. These young people experienced high levels and different kinds of violence, including sexual abuse and family violence.<sup>1</sup> It is often asserted that young people who experience abuse do not talk about it. The face to face interviews for this study show that a majority of young people *did* attempt to disclose their abuse to at least one person although this information was not identified in the surveys for this study. Eighty per cent – 48 of the 60 young people we spoke to – attempted to disclose the abuse before they were 18 years old. Some of these disclosures led to protective action and some did not. Research<sup>2</sup> has suggested that sexual abuse is unlikely to be disclosed – and yet 38 of the 44 young people (86 per cent) who suffered from sexual abuse<sup>3</sup> did disclose during childhood; 66 per cent attempted to disclose when the abuse was happening. However, just like many high profile cases, not all of these disclosures were “heard” or acted upon. Young people generally made more than one disclosure. Of the 203 disclosures in childhood that were made, 117 disclosures (58 per cent) were acted upon by recipients. Suffering from abuse is a distressing experience. It should be no surprise that disclosures that were ignored, denied or badly handled added to the negative experiences of the young people in this study.

Policy-makers and people working with children should use the evidence in this report to support better identification of abuse by adults, reduce the barriers to disclosure and to improve the experience of disclosure for young people. Practitioners should particularly consider how they can change their practice to ensure that the experiences of the young people in this report are not repeated.

## The nature of disclosures

Although many young people did disclose their abuse before they turned 18, these disclosures often came a long time after the abuse began. For young people who experienced sexual abuse, the younger they were when the abuse started, the longer the delay in their disclosing. The time between the onset of the sexual abuse and the point at which the young person tried to tell someone ranges from one week to 18 years, with the average being 7.8 years. Very few of the young people who reported family or interpersonal

violence (but not sexual abuse) sought help from others during the period of abuse.

Young people told others about their abuse in a variety of ways, from direct, verbal disclosures to indirect disclosures through their behaviour or words. Many young people sought help to stop the abuse, but other reasons for seeking help were also given, for example, to protect others, to seek justice and to receive emotional support. While young people made initial disclosures to a range of people, three quarters were to informal recipients of disclosure, most often their mothers and friends. For most young people, their friends provided emotional, practical and moral support and noticed worrying changes in behaviour. For some young people, their experience of telling friends was negative, with responses by friends including disbelief that the abuse occurred. In some extreme situations, friends turned on the young people, highlighting the need for young people to be equipped with information on how to respond to a friend who is distressed. More than half of the disclosures to mothers were to stop the abuse, but only nine mothers (30 per cent) took some action to stop the abuse and five mothers (17 per cent) ignored the disclosure or denied that the abuse occurred.

One quarter of initial disclosures to formal recipients were most often made to teachers. No social workers received initial disclosures, even though some families were at that time involved with children’s services. Some teachers who took safeguarding action immediately were seen as helpful and positive, highlighting the need for professionals to respond quickly and appropriately to disclosures.

## What were the key barriers to disclosure?

The young people shared a variety of reasons why it was difficult to seek help. Many had no one to turn to. They lived in families with multiple problems, such as substance misuse, parental mental health or disability, and violence in their families. Some were suffering abuse from a number of perpetrators.

For many, when the abuse started, they were developmentally unable to understand that the abuse was wrong or they sensed that the abuse was wrong but lacked the vocabulary to describe or confirm their anxiety about it. A number of the young people felt threatened or intimidated by the perpetrator to keep silent. Approximately one quarter expressed anxieties

1 Where useful, the analysis looked at the young people as two distinct groups to compare the experience of those who suffered childhood sexual abuse and those who did not.

2 London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. and Shuman, D. (2005) ‘Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell?’ *Psychology, Public Policy & the Law*, 11(1): 194–226.

3 These young people experienced severe contact sexual abuse as defined in Appendix A.

about disclosing abuse because they felt ashamed, embarrassed or were afraid of being stigmatised or accused of lying.

An important finding was that some young people did not feel that they could disclose their abuse at the time but they would have liked someone to notice and ask them. A number of the young people had contact with professionals (particularly police and social services) and believe that professionals should have asked more questions to uncover the nature of their depression and self-harming behaviours which stemmed directly from the abuse they were experiencing. Some young people also believe that professionals, particularly education professionals, should have noticed bruises and other injuries they sustained from the abuse. Finally, some young people believe that professionals may have uncovered their abuse sooner if they had examined wider family issues in contrast to a limited focus on “one” incident of family violence.

### What promoted disclosures?

Despite the barriers, many of the young people found the strength to disclose their abuse. For some, this occurred when someone noticed the signs and impact of abuse and asked about it. It is a very powerful motivator for young people to disclose if an adult takes notice of their struggles and asks them. Some young people described how others asked a direct question, whereas other young people said their disclosures were promoted over time through building trust which often took the form of providing a safe place to talk and encourage eventual disclosure. Developmental changes and learning helped young people understand the nature of their abuse and enabled them to vocalise what was happening. Some young people disclosed the abuse when they felt that they had finally reached a point where they could no longer cope. Other young people said that escalating violence in the abusive acts forced them to seek help while some sought help to protect others from similar abuse.

### The disclosure journey

The experiences of the young people as they disclosed has been described as a journey, because disclosure and how people respond is not something that happens once and is over in an instant. Each young person’s journey was unique. For the vast majority of the young people (90 per cent), at least part of their journey, if not all, was negative. There were numerous missed opportunities for intervention and support identified along these journeys. Negative journeys were characterised by poor responses from those to whom they had disclosed, lack of support, particularly emotional support, and a lack of protective action taken.

How professionals communicated with the young people was key to the experience being viewed as either positive and helpful or negative and unhelpful. Characteristics of a more positive response to disclosure were: engaging with the young person, not just the parents; using age and developmentally appropriate words and communication styles; providing a safe place to talk; and informing the young person of the actions they were going to take and the progress of the investigation and case.

The young people told too many tragic stories where disclosure resulted in the young person being made to meet with professionals and the perpetrator of the abuse and/or a parent who was complicit or actively ignored the abuse. Within these scenarios, three young people recanted their disclosure and went on to suffer additional abuse.

Disclosures that resulted in a positive experience for young people accounted for only 10 per cent and had three key features. The young person felt *believed*. Some action was taken to *protect* the young person, such as a report to another professional. The young person received some kind of emotional *support* to help them through the process. Young people want someone to notice when things are not right, someone to ask when they have concerns and someone to hear them when they do disclose.

### Conclusion

This research has highlighted the need for greater awareness about the signs of abuse, that children do disclose but we don’t hear those disclosures. The research has emphasised the need for professionals to ask young people about abuse in a direct and developmentally appropriate manner, while ensuring they are safely able to disclose. Children and young people need to be provided with better knowledge about boundaries, their rights to protection and safety, and healthy relationships, and information about where and how to seek help. The research has also highlighted the important role of other adults in noticing the signs of abuse and hearing disclosures in all of their forms.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

This report explores the ways in which children and young people tell others about their abuse and the barriers that might exist to prevent them from doing so. It explores what might help children and young people to tell someone about their abuse. It also identifies the many missed opportunities by professionals and other adults to intervene in the cases of the 60 young adults interviewed for this report. These young people experienced significant levels of family and community violence and talked in depth about some of these experiences. There is a particular focus in this report on sexual abuse because of the high number of young people who reported experiencing this, although others talked about physical abuse, neglect, bullying and witnessing domestic violence. Key insights relevant to friends, family members and different professionals are drawn out.

## 1.1 Context

The revelations about the prolific sexual abuse perpetrated by Jimmy Savile have sharply highlighted the ongoing problem of sexual abuse as a secret and hidden crime. Up to 450 individuals have so far come forward with allegations of sexual abuse, according to the Operation Yewtree report *Giving victims a voice*.<sup>4</sup> These individuals reported abuse by Savile dating back to the 1950s, with the most recent allegation reported to have occurred in 2006. Most of those who have since come forward never reported this abuse until now.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that public and political awareness of sexual abuse has significantly increased since the 1960s, the “problem” of disclosure remains very much a live and contemporary issue. Research and practice emerging over the last 30 years has consistently found that children and young people face immense challenges to disclosure, with many delaying their disclosures for a significant period of time and some children never talking about it at all.<sup>6</sup> The young people who were part of this study

reported abuse which occurred between the years of 1986 and 2007. First attempted disclosures by this group occurred between the years of 1993 and 2009, many of which occurred after 2000. The difficulties faced in disclosing abuse are, for some, still very recent and underscore the importance of continued efforts to address the barriers children face in seeking help and improving detection by professionals and the public.

There are fewer studies about children disclosing other forms of abuse such as physical abuse and neglect, but those that exist suggest that these children also face difficulties in disclosing what they experience. A national study on the prevalence of physical abuse by a parent or caregiver in Sweden, for example, found that only a small number (7 per cent) of those who reported physical abuse disclosed this to the authorities, although the study did not report whether children and young people told anyone else such as a teacher or a friend.<sup>7</sup> In the UK, a ChildLine *Casenotes* report on calls made by children about physical abuse found that just over a quarter of the children spoken to had never formally or informally told anyone – apart from ChildLine volunteers – about their physical abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Research suggests that a number of factors may influence a child or young person’s decision to disclose, although no specific factor has been identified as significant across multiple quantitative studies. For example, children abused by family members have been found, in some studies, to be less likely to disclose than those abused by non-family members.<sup>9</sup> But other studies have not found this to be the case.<sup>10</sup> The age of the child at onset of abuse has also been identified as a predictor in some studies, but not significant in others.<sup>11</sup>

4 Grey, D. and Watts, P. (2013) *Giving Victims a Voice*. Joint report by the NSPCC and the Metropolitan Police.

5 Grey and Watts (2013)

6 London, K. *et al.* (2005) ‘Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell?’ *Psychology, Public Policy & the Law*, 11(1): 194–226; McElvaney, R. (2013). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: Delays, non-disclosure and partial disclosure. What the research tells us and implications for practice. *Child Abuse Review*, Wiley Online Library, DOI: 10.1002/car.

7 Annerbach, E., Wingren, G., Svedin, C. and Gustafsson, P. (2010) ‘Prevalence and characteristics of child physical abuse in Sweden – findings from a population-based youth survey’, *Acta Paediatrica*, 99: 1229–36.

8 ChildLine (2006) *What children and young people tell ChildLine about physical abuse*. ChildLine: London.

9 Goodman-Brown, T., Edelstein, R., Goodman, G., Jones, D. and Gordon, D. (2003) ‘Why children tell: a model of children’s disclosure of sexual abuse’, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 27(5) May: 525–40.

10 For example, see: Arata, C.M. (1998). ‘To tell or not to tell: Current functioning of child sexual abuse survivors who disclosed their victimization’, *Child Maltreatment*, 3: 63–71; Lamb, S. and Edgar-Smith, S. (1994). ‘Aspects of disclosure: Mediators of outcome of childhood sexual abuse’, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9: 307–26.

11 See London *et al.* (2005) for full discussion of this review.





Qualitative studies have described a wider range of contextual factors such as the availability of a trusted adult or peer to talk to;<sup>12</sup> anxiety that a disclosure will not be believed;<sup>13</sup> feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment;<sup>14</sup> fear of a loss of control over the disclosure;<sup>15</sup> a lack of knowledge of services that can help;<sup>16</sup> and the stigma of involvement with formal agencies.<sup>17</sup> Family factors have also been found to influence disclosures. Those characterised by rigidly fixed gender roles, chaos and aggression, the presence of other forms of child abuse, domestic violence and dysfunctional communication were found to negatively affect children's decisions to tell.<sup>18</sup> Neighbourhood, community and societal responses have also been implicated in children's decisions to seek help.<sup>19</sup> Some researchers have suggested that being asked specifically about abuse experiences can increase the likelihood of children and young people disclosing their abuse.<sup>20</sup>

In general, this study supports the findings of many of these previous studies regarding the contextual factors that serve as a barrier to disclosure. This study adds important evidence for consideration about the perception that young people do not disclose their abuse. Interventions and strategies for addressing the problems associated with disclosure may not be optimal if they are based solely on quantitative research evidence which may well be limited.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the qualitative element of this study shows that a majority of young people *did* attempt to disclose their abuse to at least one person although this information was not identified in the quantitative element of the study. This research also raises the question for researchers and practitioners about how to determine what is a disclosure. Young people described how they wanted to tell, but couldn't use direct words so they tried to give clues with actions and indirect words. This study's survey data and interviews presents different rates of disclosure of abuse that call into question the low levels of disclosure noted in the current evidence base.

## 1.2 Overview of the study

### 1.2.1 Research aims and objectives<sup>22</sup>

This study asks: "who do you turn to?" In particular it focuses on children and young people's help-seeking through disclosure. We explore the following questions:

- How do young abuse survivors perceive the role of informal support structures in stopping abuse?
- How important is peer support or other informal sources of support in helping children and young people to stop abuse?
- What role do family context and relationships play in buffering or contributing to abusive situations? How do family dynamics interact and intersect with children's strategies to stop abuse?
- Do young abuse survivors consider safeguarding and child protection services a help or hindrance in stopping the abuse of children and young people?

### 1.2.2 Links to the NSPCC child maltreatment study<sup>23</sup>

The current study on help-seeking was linked, and ran parallel, to another NSPCC study on child maltreatment in the UK (see Appendix A). This study collected data during the latter stages of the child maltreatment study, which provided a perfect opportunity to follow up with some of the original study participants; to harmonise some aspects of data collection; and to place the qualitative sample in a national context.<sup>24</sup>

12 Hallett, C., Murray, C. and Punch, S. (2003) 'Young People and Welfare: Negotiating pathways'. In C. Hallett and A. Prout (eds) *Hearing the Voices of Children: Social policy for a new century*. London: Routledge Falmer.

13 Butler, I. and Williamson, H. (1994) *Children speak: children, trauma and social work*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.

14 Dorahy, M. & Clearwater, K. (2012) Shame and guilt in men exposed to childhood sexual abuse: a qualitative investigation. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 21(2), 155–175.

15 Butler and Williamson (1994)

16 Crisma, M., Bascelli, E., Paci, D. and Romito, P. (2004) 'Adolescents who experienced sexual abuse: fears, needs and impediments to disclosure', *Child Abuse and Neglect* (28): 1035–48.

17 Hallett *et al.* (2003)

18 Alaggia, R. (2010) 'An ecological analysis of child sexual abuse disclosure: Considerations for child and adolescent mental health', *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 19(1): 32–39.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Smith, D.W., Letrouneau, E.J., Saunders, B.E., Kilpatrick, D.G., Resnick, H.S. and Best, C.L. (2000) 'Delay in Disclosure of Childhood Rape: Results from a National Survey', *Child Abuse and Neglect* 24(2): 273–87; Lanktree, C., Briere, J. and Zaidi, L. (1991) 'Incidence and Impact of Sexual Abuse in a Child Outpatient Sample: The Role of Direct Inquiry', *Child Abuse and Neglect* 15: 447–53.

21 Kogan, S. (2005) The role of disclosing child sexual abuse on adolescent adjustment and revictimisation. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 14(2): 25–47; Jonzon, E. and Lindblad, F. (2004). Disclosure, reactions and social support: findings from a sample of adult victims of child sexual abuse. *Child Maltreatment*, 9(2): 190–200.

22 Broad research aims can be found in Appendix B.

23 The full study is entitled *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today*

24 Full details of the methodology and findings from Radford *et al.*'s (2011) study can be found on the NSPCC website at [www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/child\\_abuse\\_neglect\\_research\\_wda84173.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/child_abuse_neglect_research_wda84173.html).

### 1.2.3 Methods

A full account of the methodology adopted in this study can be found in Appendix A. The study used a mixed method approach to collect data retrospectively from 60 young adults aged 18 to 24 years at the time of interviews in 2009–10. The target population sought for the study was young adults aged 18 to 24, in order to match the age range of participants in the NSPCC child maltreatment study, and who had experienced sexual, physical or emotional abuse and neglect, or who had witnessed domestic violence or peer violence, or who had any combination of these experiences.

Quantitative data for this study was collected using the *same* questionnaire as that used in the NSPCC child maltreatment study<sup>25</sup> (from hereon referred to as “the questionnaire”). This was completed by young people using computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI).

Qualitative data was collected via in-depth interviews after the young people had completed the questionnaire. Some of the data reported in the questionnaire was not subsequently reported in the in-depth interviews, and this will be highlighted where relevant within the findings (see section 2.2 for a description of the key differences). The NSPCC ethics committee granted full ethical approval for the study in 2009. It is important to note the limitations of this study, which are fully discussed in Appendix A.

## 1.3 Definitions and terminology

*Child* – Within this report, a “child” is defined as anyone who has not yet reached their eighteenth birthday. Throughout the report, the term “child” will be used to refer to 11 and under; and “young person” to refer to those between the ages of 12 and 17 (up to the age of 18).

*Disclosure* – In this study, disclosure (ie, the action of making new or secret information known) was conceptualised as a complex process which could occur in many different ways, for example, through verbal or non-verbal means, directly or indirectly, partially or fully and prompted or accidentally.<sup>26</sup> A disclosure may be to an informal recipient, such as family and friends, or to formal agencies and professionals, such as social services and the police. Later in the report, there is a full section which discusses and describes disclosures made by the study sample.

*Delayed disclosure* – Within this report, a delayed disclosure is any disclosure that occurred at least six months after the abuse began.

*The questionnaire* – Throughout the report, “the questionnaire” refers to the survey used in the NSPCC child maltreatment study and the follow-up study. The same questionnaire was used in both studies, without any adaptations.

*The general population* – This phrase refers to the sample of young adults aged 18 to 24 years who took part in the NSPCC child maltreatment study (n=1,761) and who represent the general population of 18 to 24 year olds in the United Kingdom.

*The study/young people* – This phrase will be used throughout the report to refer to the 60 young people aged 18 to 24 who took part in the study whose findings are being reported here.

*Young people who experienced other forms of abuse* – This phrase will be used throughout the report to refer to the specific study subgroup of 16 young people who did not experience severe contact sexual abuse, but did experience other forms of abuse.

*Young people who experienced sexual abuse* – This phrase will be used throughout the report to refer to the specific study subgroup of 44 young people who experienced severe contact sexual abuse. The determination of severe contact sexual abuse is detailed in Appendix A. Many of these young people also experienced other forms of abuse.

## 1.4 Report structure

The findings presented here are set out in four main chapters:

- Chapter 2: The young people. This chapter describes characteristics of the young people in the sample, their age and ethnicity, and their experiences of violence and abuse as compared with the general population sample. The data used for this chapter is drawn from the questionnaire.
- Chapter 3: Disclosing abuse. This chapter explores the young person’s experiences of and others’ responses to disclosure. Interviews, and where appropriate, data from the questionnaire have been used in this chapter. In particular, details on what made disclosure difficult and what promoted disclosure will be explored. Special consideration is given of the experiences of young people in disclosing to key groups: mothers, friends, teachers, the police and courts and social care professionals.

<sup>25</sup> See Radford *et al.* (2011) for detail.

<sup>26</sup> Alaggia, R. (2010) An ecological analysis of child sexual abuse disclosure: considerations for child and adolescent mental health. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 19(1): 32–39.

- Chapter 4: Missed opportunities. This chapter draws on the findings from the previous chapter to explore where there were missed opportunities for intervention. An ecological framework is used.
- Chapter 5: The disclosure journey. This chapter uses the interviews with young people to characterise their journey of disclosure.

The young people in this study experienced particularly high levels of community and family violence and abuse, much higher than has been reported within the UK general population. The high – and overlapping – levels of violence and abuse reported mean that this study sample is unrepresentative of the general population and closer in similarity to the 10 per cent most victimised group – or polyvictims – in the child maltreatment study. It is important to bear this in mind when reading the findings. Furthermore, the findings will be most relevant to children and young people who are female and White British.



# Chapter 2: The young people

## 2.1 Demographic characteristics

The 60 young people were compared with the general population of young people aged 18 to 24 on key demographic characteristics (Table 1). The young people in this study are significantly different from the general population sample by gender, comprised of significantly fewer young men. Research has shown that fewer boys and/or men report sexual abuse than girls and/or women<sup>27</sup>, which may explain why such a low proportion of young men with these experiences took part.

The majority of the young people were living in England at the time of interview, although two were living in Scotland. All were born in the United Kingdom. Ninety-two per cent (n=55) are White British, a higher percentage than the general population sample. The remaining 8 per cent (n=5) are Black African or Black British (n=1), White and Black Caribbean (n=2) and White and Black African (n=2). The average age of the young people at the time of interview was 21, which is similar to the general population sample. Disability is significantly higher among these young people than the general population sample, reporting the following types: mobility (n=4); sight (n=3); hearing (n=3); communication/speech (n=1); learning difficulties (n=4); depression (n=1); and “other” (n=18).<sup>28</sup> Finally, only a slightly higher percentage of the young people reported special educational needs than the general population sample.

## 2.2 Experiences of abuse in childhood

These young people reported a broad range of abuse and victimisation experiences in childhood within the questionnaire. The abuses reported occurred between the years of 1986 and 2007.<sup>29</sup> Figure 1 illustrates a comparison of the young people with the general population sample on selected abuse and victimisation types. Across all domains, these young people reported more abuse and victimisation than the general population. More than 80 per cent of the young people reported child maltreatment, witnessing family violence, property victimisation, and witnessing community violence. More than 90 per cent reported sexual abuse, peer violence and physical violence.

While the questionnaire data provides an overview of the range of experiences reported by the young people, the in-depth interviews were more focused. Not all victimisation experiences could be covered in a two-hour interview. The interviews were designed to allow young people to talk about the experiences that were most significant for them. In order to make links between help-seeking and abuse experiences within the interview data, it is important to be clear about *which* abuse experiences were discussed in the interviews. Table 2 indicates the primary types of abuse discussed in the interviews and the experiences of violence and abuse reported in the questionnaire.

**Table 1: Key demographics – The young people compared with the national child maltreatment sample**

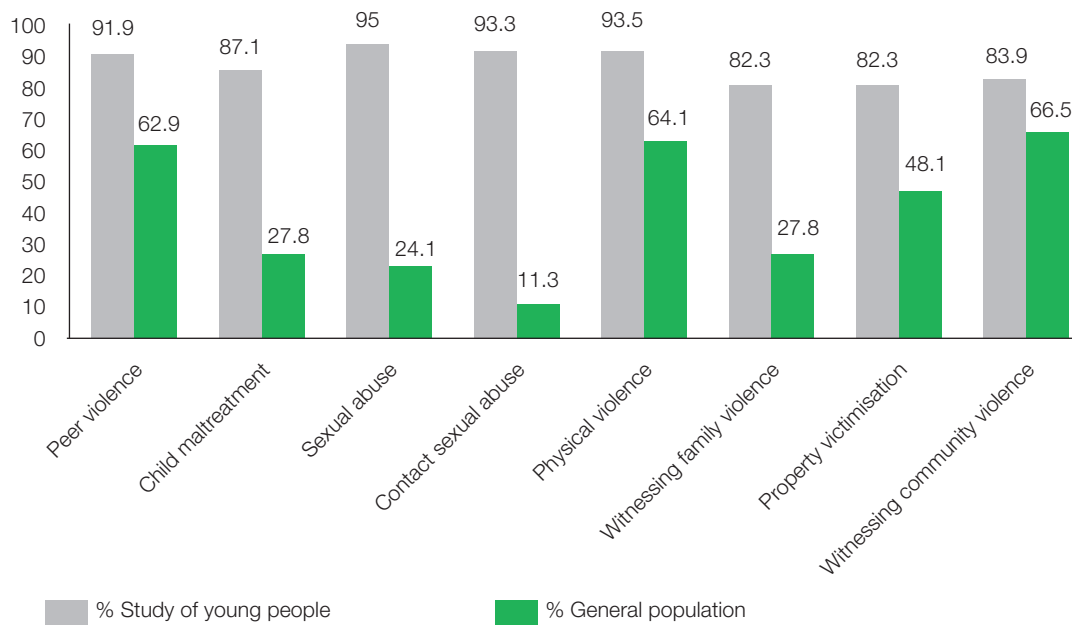
	Study young people, 18 to 24 yrs (n=60)	General population sample of 18 to 24 yrs (n=1,761)
Gender	88% female (n=53) 12% male (n=7)	54% female 46.3% male
Mean age and standard deviation	21.33 (sd=1.93)	20.56 (sd=1.98)
Ethnicity	92% White majority 8% Black or minority	81.5% White majority 18.5% Black or minority
Disability	43% (n=26)	7.4%
Special educational needs	10% (n=6)	8.1%

27 Radford *et al.* (2011); Putnam, F. (2005) ‘Ten-year research update review: Child sexual abuse’, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 42(3): 269–78.

28 The “other” category provided no space for the young person to specify the disability, therefore it is not possible to be more specific about these responses.

29 This was calculated using young people’s birthdates, reported age at first abuse and reported age when abuse stopped.

**Figure 1: Experiences of abuse in childhood – the young people compared with the general population sample**



**Table 2: Comparison of abuse and victimisation experiences reported in the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews**

	Number (%) of young people reporting abuse in the questionnaire (broad exposure)	Number (%) of young people reporting abuse in the interviews
Sexual abuse/ violence/exploitation	57 (95%)	44 (73%)
Physical abuse by a parent or caregiver	39 (65%)	34 (57%)
Physical abuse by other adults	23 (38%)	4 (7%)
Peer violence (referred to as bullying in in-depth interviews)	56 (93%)	21 (35%)
Emotional abuse	43 (72%)	18 (30%)
Neglect	37 (62%)	16 (25%)
Witnessing domestic violence	45 (75%)	16 (25%)
Dating violence	14 (23%)	6 (10%)

Sexual abuse was the most common type of abuse discussed in the interviews. Physical violence by a parent or caregiver and peer violence were also fairly common topics of discussion. There is a significant gap between reports of emotional abuse and neglect in the questionnaire and what was reported about these types of abuse in the interviews. It is not clear whether young people minimised emotional abuse and neglect in the interviews in favour of discussing

other abuse experiences that were more significant for them; or alternately, that they did not identify or recognise emotional abuse and neglect in the same way that researchers do. Unfortunately, there is little research evidence about children’s help-seeking in relation to neglect<sup>30</sup>. A recent review of ChildLine statistics showed that during 2011/2012 fewer children were counselled by ChildLine about neglect than other forms of abuse such as physical and sexual abuse.<sup>31</sup>

30 Daniel, B., Taylor, J. and Scott, J. (2010) ‘Recognition of neglect and early response’. *Child and Family Social Work*, 15: 248–57.

31 During 2011/12 ChildLine carried out 1,646 counselling sessions with children and young people where their main reason for contacting ChildLine was neglect. This can be compared to 15,993 who contacted them about sexual abuse and 17,542 about physical abuse during 2011–12. ChildLine Business Support Team.

## 2.3 Polyvictimisation

Not only did the young people report higher levels of abuse within individual domains of victimisation than the general population sample, but a significant proportion reported many different forms of victimisation in childhood and adolescence and thus can be considered “polyvictims”. “Polyvictimisation” is defined as having experienced multiple victimisations of *different kinds*, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying and witnessing family violence.<sup>32</sup> The calculation of polyvictimisation for these young people is described in Appendix A. A significant majority (n=49, 82 per cent) of the young people reported 15 or more different maltreatment and victimisation experiences and are considered to be polyvictims.

## 2.4 Sexual abuse

Although 95 per cent (n=57) of the young people reported contact sexual abuse in the questionnaire, only 73 per cent (n=44) discussed severe contact sexual abuse in their interviews. These 44 young people make up the group whose accounts were analysed as the young people who experienced severe contact sexual abuse. Calculation of contact sexual abuse and severe contact sexual abuse can be found in Appendix A.

### 2.4.1 Perpetrators of sexual abuse

Questionnaire and interview data was analysed to identify accurately perpetrators of the sexual abuse. Table 3 shows that the majority of perpetrators reported by these young people were family members. Biological and step-fathers make up almost half of the perpetrators. Other family perpetrators include grandfathers or step-grandfathers, uncles and cousins. Perpetrators who were other known adults include a neighbour, a friend’s father, a family friend and the mother’s partner – not identified as a step-father. Two young women identified other unknown adults who perpetrated sexual abuse which was organised and facilitated by the young women’s fathers. One young woman reported a sexual assault by an unknown adult while on holiday in addition to abuse perpetrated by her father. In total, five young women reported multiple experiences of sexual abuse or assault perpetrated by different people – this includes the three described above, and one young woman who was abused by her father and brothers, and another abused by her father and later by her step-father. As noted before, this group of young people are not representative of the general population where very few (2.1 per cent) were abused by parents and step-parents.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 3: Perpetrators of sexual abuse**

	Number of young people reporting perpetrator type
Biological fathers	13
Step-fathers	9
Other family members (excluding siblings) who were not living with young person	7
Other family members (excluding siblings) who were living with young person	2
Brothers or step-brothers	7
Other known adults	4
Other unknown adults	3
Other known young people	3
Peers	2

<sup>32</sup> Finklehor, D., Turner, H., Hamby, S. and Ormrod, R. (2011). ‘Poly-victimisation: Children’s exposure to multiple types of violence, crime and abuse’, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. US Department of Justice; Office of Justice Programs. [www.ojp.usdoj.gov](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov)

<sup>33</sup> NSPCC Briefing on Sexual Abuse (Forthcoming2013).

# Chapter 3: Disclosing abuse

## Key insights

- Young people in this study did try to tell someone about their sexual abuse during the time the abuse was occurring, but the disclosure was often significantly delayed from the start of the abuse, for on average 7.8 years.
- The younger the sexual abuse started, the longer it took to disclose.
- Questionnaire data provides a very limited view of disclosures and can result in inaccurate assumptions about the extent to which children reach out for help.
- While some children and young people disclose abuse directly and verbally, others attempt disclosures indirectly, behaviourally and non-verbally.
- Children and young people seek a range of support when they disclose abuse, and stopping abuse is not always the key reason that they tell. Other reasons for seeking help were to protect others, to seek justice and to receive emotional support.
- Young people told a diverse range of people about their abuse; friends and mothers were the most common informal recipients of disclosure and teachers were the most common professional.
- Investigations, if not handled sensitively, can encourage children to retract disclosures of abuse.

This section of the report presents the findings on patterns and experiences of disclosure reported by the young people, drawing on the questionnaire and the interviews. The findings in this chapter are structured into four sections which look at how disclosures can be described; what prevented disclosures in childhood; what promoted disclosures; and then a spotlight on mothers, friends, teachers, the criminal justice system and social services. Each section examines disclosure themes for two groups of

young people – those who experienced sexual abuse (n=44) and those who experienced other forms of abuse (n=16).

In brief, first attempted disclosures of abuse occurred between the years of 1993 and 2009. First attempted disclosures made by young people when they were under the age of 18 occurred between 1993 and 2008. At least 22 young people disclosed abuse between the years of 2000 and 2008.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, while some disclosures occurred more than 13 years ago, a majority of young people who sought help did so much more recently. The young people's interviews indicate that disclosures or disclosure attempts of sexual abuse during the period of abuse were common for 66 per cent of the young people. The study showed that there were limitations to using the questionnaire data to explore disclosure compared to the interview data. The questionnaire data, for example, shows a much smaller percentage of disclosures than were revealed by the subsequent interviews, underscoring the importance of examining disclosure through qualitative methods. Although young people often disclosed abuse while it was ongoing, they usually waited a significant amount of time after the abuse first began to reach out for help. It was less common for those young people who did not experience sexual abuse to disclose their abuse at the time the abuse was occurring.

The interviews highlight the many attempts made by the young people to tell someone about their abuse. They told in a range of different ways, some directly but others in more subtle or partial ways. Young people made disclosures for a range of reasons, not always to seek help in stopping abuse. The need for emotional support was clear from many of the accounts. While young people told a diverse range of people about their abuse, friends and mothers were by far the most common people to receive initial disclosures in both groups, supporting other research findings in this area.<sup>35</sup> Teachers are a key professional group who receive initial disclosures, while the police and social services more commonly receive disclosures after the young person had first told someone else.

34 Some young people could not remember their exact age at disclosure and therefore year of disclosure could not be calculated; it is possible that more than 22 young people first disclosed after 2000.

35 Wattam, C. and Woodward, C. (1996) 'And do I Abuse my Children? ... No!. Learning about prevention from people who have experienced child abuse' in *Childhood Matters: report of the National Commission of Inquiry into the prevention of child abuse*. Vol 2: Background Papers, London: The Stationary Office; Cawson, P., Wattam, C., Brooker, S. and Kelly, G. (2000) *Child Maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect*. NSPCC: London.



Table 4: Time when first disclosures occurred (interview data)

	Number/% of young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=44)	Number/% of young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=16)
First disclosures during period of abuse	29 (66%)	3 (19%)
First disclosures after abuse stopped but under the age of 18	9 (20%)	7 (44%)
First disclosures after abuse stopped but over the age of 18	6 (14%)	6 (38%)

### 3.1 How can disclosures be described?

The study explores various aspects of disclosure in order to create a picture of disclosure by the young people. These include:

1. time taken to disclose abuse
2. the sequence, mode and general purpose of disclosures
3. the most common – and least common – recipients of disclosure.

#### 3.1.1 Time taken to disclose

Appendix A provides a description of how disclosure in childhood was calculated.

#### *Young people who experienced sexual abuse*

According to questionnaire responses, seven (16 per cent) of the young people who reported sexual abuse told someone – or attempted to tell – “at the time” or, during the period of abuse. Other retrospective studies of adults sexually abused in childhood often show variable – but mostly low – rates of disclosure in childhood; roughly two-thirds are found to remain silent about abuse.<sup>36</sup> The percentage reported for the young people in this study is very low, and provides support for the belief that children and young people do not disclose sexual abuse. However, the *interviews* with the young people in this study tell a much more complex story than this, where a further 22 young people (for a total of 29, or 66 per cent) told, or attempted to tell, someone about the abuse at the time or during the period of abuse. It is clear that the questionnaire provides very limited information about disclosure. When given the opportunity to provide

more detail in interviews, the young people revealed more about their attempts to tell others that they were being abused. Questionnaire data provides a very limited view of disclosures and can cause policy-makers, practitioners and academics to make inaccurate assumptions about the extent to which children reach out for help. Understanding the various ways that children try to tell is crucial to gain insight into better responses by adults and professionals.

Table 4 also illustrates that some young people only disclosed after sexual abuse had stopped – nine under the age of 18 and a further six young people for the first time once over the age of 18. Those young people aged over 18 usually disclosed when seeking emotional support for the impacts of the abuse or when seeking to bring the perpetrator to justice.

Of those who disclosed during the period of abuse, less than half (n=12) said that this stopped the abuse. The remaining 17 said that their first attempt to tell someone did not stop the abuse. There were three main reasons why abuse did not stop:

- the recipient of disclosure did not hear or recognise what the young person was trying to tell them;
- the recipient of disclosure denied or ignored what the young person told them;
- the recipient of disclosure took insufficient or unhelpful action or handled the disclosure poorly.

These reasons will be explored in greater detail later in the report. Of those young people whose first disclosure did not stop the abuse, 12 reported further disclosures under the age of 18, only half of which led to intervention that stopped the abuse.

36 London *et al.* (2005).

**Table 5: Total number of disclosures made by the young people who experienced sexual abuse and by those who experienced other forms of abuse**

	Total number of disclosures
Total number of disclosures identified in the in-depth interviews	238
<b>Young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=44)</b>	
Total number of disclosures made	196
Total number of disclosures made under the age of 18	167
Total number of disclosures under age 18 made specifically about sexual abuse	150
Total number of disclosures made under the age of 18 about other forms of abuse	17
<b>Young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=16)</b>	
Total number of disclosures made	42
Total number of disclosures made under the age of 18	36

### Young people who experienced other forms of abuse

Very few of the young people who reported family or interpersonal violence sought help from others during the period of abuse (see Table 4). Many of these young people reported that other family members or friends knew about the violence within the household because they had witnessed it themselves, but very few intervened or reported the abuse to the authorities. The failure by these witnesses to act led to the belief, by some young people, that the abuse was normal or acceptable and therefore provided a strong incentive for them to remain silent.

### Latency to disclosure

Latency is a measure of time delay. In the case of abuse disclosure, it refers to the time between the commencement of abuse and the point at which a child or young person discloses or attempts to disclose that abuse. Details on how latency was calculated and tested can be found in Appendix A. For young people who experienced sexual abuse, the time between the start of the abuse and the point at which the young person tried to tell someone ranges from one week to 18 years, with the average being 7.80 years. There is an inverse and significant relationship between the age abuse started and the number of years that passed before the first disclosure. For those who experienced sexual abuse, the younger the age of the child or young person when the abuse started, the longer the delay before they disclosed it. For those young people who experienced other forms of abuse, latency could not be calculated because many of the young people could not remember when the abuse started.

### 3.1.2 Sequence, mode and general purpose of disclosures

In this section, characteristics of disclosures such as type, mode and purpose, as well as the help sought by the young people, are presented. Details on how characterisations were calculated can be found in Appendix A. Table 5 provides a breakdown of 238 disclosures or disclosure attempts made by the young people.

#### Sequence and formality of disclosure

Disclosures in the young person's account followed a "sequence". For instance, a child or young person may tell their mother that they are being abused. The mother may do nothing or she may report it to the police. If she reports it to the police, and the police investigate and interview the child, the child then discloses a second time, to the authorities this time. Sequence is important because the characteristics of disclosures made in the first instance and those made subsequently are different. Disclosures in this report have been classified into two sequential types for the purpose of clarity: initial and linked disclosures. Disclosures can also be classified into "formal" disclosures to professionals and "informal" disclosures to family or friends.

#### Young people who experience sexual abuse

Thirty-eight of the young people (30 of whom are also classified as polyvictims) made 150 total disclosures about *sexual abuse* under the age of 18. This is, on average, four disclosures related to sexual abuse per young person. Ten young people in this group attempted 11 disclosures of physical abuse under the age of 18 and six attempted to disclose bullying.

Figure 2: All disclosures by young people who experienced sexual abuse, by sequence and formality

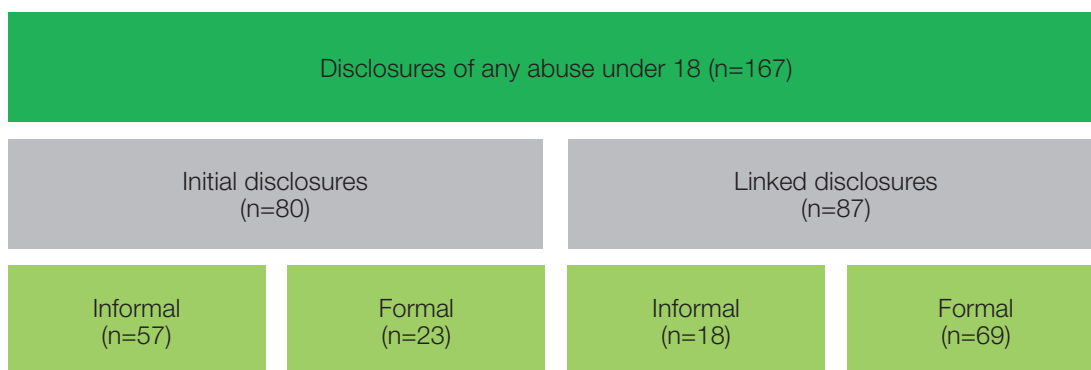


Figure 3: All disclosures by young people who experienced other forms of abuse, by sequence and formality

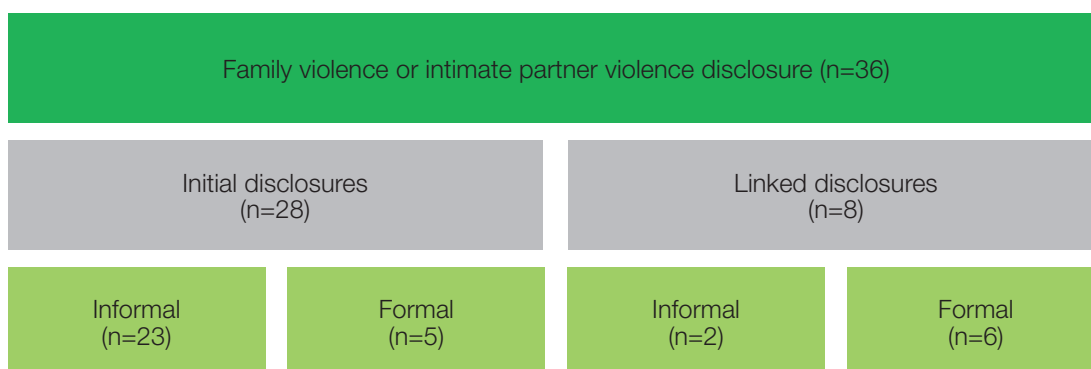


Figure 2 shows a slightly higher number of linked disclosures than initial disclosures. Once a disclosure is made, at least some will result in further disclosures being made to additional agencies or professionals. Three-quarters of initial disclosures were made to informal recipients of disclosure. Only one-quarter of initial disclosures were made to criminal justice or education professionals. Formal disclosures were far more likely to be linked disclosures made as a result of an initial informal disclosure. The number of informal disclosures which are linked disclosures is small, although this is likely to be an underestimate of the number of friends and family who came to know about the abuse after it was formally reported to the police.

### *Young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=16)*

Fourteen of the young people (13 of whom are classified as polyvictims) made 36 disclosures while under the age of 18 about family or intimate partner violence. This is, on average, 2.5 disclosures per young person. Figure 3 illustrates the number of initial and linked disclosures, and the number of informal

and formal recipients. Most of the initial disclosures were made informally to friends and family members. However, very few disclosures in this group went on to become formal disclosures – suggesting possibly that abuse of this type was considered as normal by those who experienced it.

### *Mode: How do children and young people talk about abuse?*

The accounts given by the young people suggest that children and young people disclose abuse in a variety of ways, ranging from subtle to more common, direct disclosure. Full and partial disclosures were evident in the accounts, as were verbal or non-verbal/behavioural; some were prompted or accidental. A very small number of disclosures in this sample were retracted – and only in the case of sexual abuse. Several young people made disclosures which were “assisted” by other people, for example, a friend being present and supportive when they told someone else. Table 6 shows the most and least common modes of disclosure identified by both groups.

Table 6: Modes of disclosure

	All disclosures by young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=167)		All disclosures by young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=36)	
	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures
Direct, purposeful and verbal	51	75	18	6
Indirect verbal	10	-	2	-
Partial, verbal	6	-	-	-
Accidental, direct, verbal	3	-	-	-
Prompted	6	2	-	1
Non-verbal/behavioural	2	-	3	-
Retracted	1	7	-	-
Assisted	1	3	-	1
Others knew	-	-	5	-
<b>Total disclosures</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>8</b>

Most initial and linked disclosures in both groups were characterised as *direct disclosures* of abuse made purposefully and verbally to the recipient. A small number (n=12) were *indirect verbal* disclosures, most of which were made under the age of 12. Young people made ambiguous verbal statements in attempts to alert adults to the fact that they were being abused. Most of these disclosures (n=9) were made to mothers and teachers. One young woman recalled how she tried to let family members know that something was not right:

Cause being five you don't, you don't know these things do you? You don't know what's happening to you and erm it finally clicked and I was like, 'Actually I would rather go and stay with the other grandparents, I'd rather stay with my dad's parents this weekend rather than my mother's parents so, and erm ... When it eventually clicked that something wasn't right, I'd say 'Oh grandpa's snores all the time he keeps me awake at night'. Just to try and push him out more than anything. It wasn't a particularly nice time for me and I often begged my granny, saying 'No, no I don't want him in the room' sort of thing and he would then have to sleep on the sofa.

Female, sexually abused by step-grandfather, from age 5 to 11

Descriptions of *partial disclosures* reflected the considerable anxiety that the young people felt in childhood about their abuse. Half the disclosures were made under the age of 12 and the other half were made in adolescence. It was clear from their accounts that they felt compelled to tell someone, but feared the consequences. These disclosures were

characterised by a minimisation of abuse (ie, telling "milder" versions of what happened); disclosing abuse of another person but failing to inform others that they themselves were also abused; and disclosing not the sexual abuse, but another form such as physical abuse. Partial disclosures were made for a range of reasons including fears of family reprisals, wishing to deflect blame in case of family difficulties as a result of the disclosure, and because significant levels of shame and guilt prevented full disclosure. Some partial disclosures were made to informal sources such as mothers and friends, and have also been identified and described in other qualitative research.<sup>37</sup> Other partial disclosures were made to professionals, as in the case of one young woman who had been placed, along with her sister, in a group therapy context for other familial issues:

And I remember one point when I actually said to these people (group therapists) 'My sister is allowed to watch porn videos' it wasn't it was me as well, but I didn't wanna say me as well, and it was the only way I could think of saying it without getting anything come back at me, there was no come back, 'cause it was like, well I didn't say anything really ... I was ever so worried about splitting up the family, so if I said it was my sister then it wouldn't, it wouldn't be my fault if it split up.

Female, sexual abuse and neglect by father, from age 8 to 10, physical and emotional neglect by mother through adolescence

In research studies of forensic interviews, partial disclosures have been found to be the result of inadequate questioning on the part of professionals who have used 'closed' questions rather than

37 McElvaney R. (2008). How children tell: containing the secret of child sexual abuse. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Trinity College, Dublin.





encouraging open and free narrative.<sup>38</sup> This may well be a message for a wider range of professionals working with children and for parents, carers and other family members who are concerned about a child.

*Prompted disclosures* were those made by the young people in response to someone asking them if they were being abused. This question was usually prompted because abuse of another family member came to light and family members checked with the young person to see if the same had happened to them. The young people had no intention of telling anyone about the abuse, and may never have told if they had not been asked. One young woman who had not experienced sexual abuse was prompted during a divorce and custody case by someone (she is unsure whom) where she disclosed physical abuse by her father. She recalls making this as a non-verbal disclosure which she drew in a picture.

*Accidental disclosures* are characterised by abuse coming to light unintentionally. The young people had not intended to disclose and may well never have disclosed if specific circumstances had not arisen. These may be best described as situations in which the young person's abuse came to light through means other than intentional disclosure. For example, one young woman received a letter from her father apologising for what he had done to her. Her mother found the letter in her bag and confronted the father in response. In another account, a young woman's father stored images on his computer of her that he had taken while she was changing clothes. Her brother then found these images and angrily confronted the young woman because the images were recent. She "blurted out" that she had been abused for years. This young woman would not have disclosed this at the time had her brother not discovered the images. Another young woman was watching television with her friend and an advertisement about abuse came on; she said (unintentionally, aloud):

"That's happened to me".

*Non-verbal disclosures* were primarily in the form of writing letters or drawing pictures for adults.

*Behavioural disclosures* were described as the appearance of signs and signals which the young people hoped would alert someone to the abuse, for example acting out or "seeking attention".

### Disclosures can happen in many different and subtle ways

This young woman was physically and emotionally abused by her mother throughout her childhood and adolescence. She sought help from many people in her adolescence, but this extract highlights that she had been seeking help for many more years before she finally left the family home. No one had responded.

I don't know when I first told people, but like, in the years before I left, I increasingly ... it was increasingly obvious that I was really acutely miserable. And, kind of, was ... seeking attention and somebody to try and sort it out.

Female, abused physically and emotionally by her mother up to the age of 16

### Investigations, if not handled sensitively, can encourage children to retract disclosures of abuse

For one young person, this occurred in response to an inappropriate investigative response which placed the perpetrator in the same room with her in the early phases of investigation.

The first time I told, I told my teacher, and then a social worker came and two police officers, and umm, they wanted me to talk about it, what happened. But they invited my mum and dad and sat them in the room with me. And then they asked me what happened, and so I denied it and said no, nothing's happening, 'cause I could just see my dad in the corner and I just thought oh my god.

Female, sexually abused by father who facilitated abuse by other men, from age 7 to 14

The research literature shows that retracted disclosures are generally uncommon<sup>39</sup> and a small number (n=8) in this study were characterised by an initial and/or linked disclosure which was later withdrawn or denied. Family pressure can be significant enough to encourage a child or young person to retract their disclosures. Several of the young people described being pressured by their families to retract, through subtle threats that it would adversely impact on the family or that the young person would end up in care. Alternately, families

38 See McElvaney, R. (2013). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: Delays, non-disclosure and partial disclosure. What the research tells us and implications for practice. *Child Abuse Review*, Wiley Online Library, DOI: 10.1002/car.

39 Bradley, A. and Wood, J. (1996) How do children tell? The disclosure process in child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, (20): 881–891; Bybee, D. and Mowbray, C. (1993) An analysis of allegations of sexual abuse in a multi-victim day care centre case. *Child Abuse and Neglect* (17): 767–783.

were reported to have accused young people of lying about abuse which prompted retractions. However, retractions most commonly arose subsequent to insensitive investigations by professionals. In these cases, parents, one or both who were perpetrators of abuse, were invited into the room during the interview.

Finally, *assisted disclosures* are those made by the young person with the help of someone else, for example a friend. These are classified under “linked” disclosures because in these cases an initial disclosure had already been made to someone else who then “helped” the young person to disclose further.

A teacher at school noticed erm, a P, my P.E teacher noticed there was something going on and questioned me about it ... Well I got forced to tell her, 'cause one of my friends knew stuff was going on, so, got her in and we talked about it, erm, and erm, she told my headteacher who immediately said 'You've gotta get out of the house, I'm not letting you go home'.

Female, physically abused by father and witnessed domestic violence between parents, from age 5 to 16

### What help are children and young people seeking when they disclose abuse?

Children and young people seek a range of support when they disclose abuse, and stopping abuse is not always the key reason that they tell. Understanding what children and young people want from their disclosures is important if recipients of disclosure are to act in a way that protects, but respects, children's wishes and does not make things worse for them. Table 7 shows the main type of help the young people were seeking when they disclosed. The majority of sexual abuse disclosures were made to stop abuse.

Mothers and teachers were most often the people to whom young people turned when seeking help to stop abuse. However, many young people were seeking emotional support as the main reason for disclosure. In these cases, young people were clear that they did not want – or were not ready – for intervention but that they needed to tell someone for support. Friends and counsellors were most often turned to for emotional support but many others such as boyfriends, girlfriends, mothers, family friends, school nurses, and other family members also received disclosures for emotional support.

Several young people were uncertain about what sort of help they were looking for, but they just knew they needed to tell someone. Some told in order to protect others, such as a sibling who may have been at risk of, or was being, abused by the same perpetrator. A number wanted justice to be served, and for the perpetrator to pay for the abuse. A few young people primarily told someone in order to “inform” them of the abuse but were not seeking any intervention otherwise. One young person disclosed to “test the waters”. And for three of the young people, their disclosures were accidental and unplanned, and therefore they were uncertain what they were seeking.

### 3.1.3 To whom do children and young people disclose?

Children may turn to any number of people for help, as Table 8 below reveals. However, initial disclosures of abuse were most often made to friends and mothers. Teachers were more likely than any other professional to receive initial disclosures. Much less common are any other type of professional such as the police or health care workers, and it is notable that none of the young people turned to a social worker in the first instance even though some of them were in

Table 7: Purpose of disclosures

	All disclosures by young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=167)		All disclosures by young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=36)	
	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures
To stop abuse	39	58	8	5
Seeking emotional support	18	9	17	-
Uncertain, need to tell	9	4	0	1
To protect others	4	3	-	-
To seek justice	2	6	1	-
Response to prompt	2	5	-	2
To inform	1	2	2	-
To test the waters	1	-	-	-
Unplanned, unknown	4	0	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>8</b>

**Table 8: Recipients of initial and linked disclosures of sexual abuse**

	All disclosures by young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=167)		All disclosures by young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=36)	
	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures	Initial disclosures	Linked disclosures
Friends	15	1	8	-
Mothers	17	8	6	1
Teachers	11	9	1	2
Other <sup>40</sup>	7	3	3	-
Boyfriends/girlfriends	5	-	1	-
Family members	7	2	2	-
Family friend	3	-	-	-
Counsellors	4	4	2	-
Police	3	34	1	2
Health care workers	4	1	1	-
Parents	2	4	1	-
ChildLine	1	1	-	-
Fathers	1	-	1	1
Social care professionals	-	20	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>8</b>

direct contact with these professionals<sup>41</sup> Disclosures to police and social care professionals were more common in linked disclosures.

## 3.2 What prevented young people from disclosing?

### Key insights

For the young people, the barriers to seeking help were significant and played a key role in the long periods of delay to disclosing. Key barriers revealed include:

- having no one to turn to: absence of someone trusted to tell and feelings of isolation
- perpetrator tactics: fears and anxieties manipulated by the perpetrator
- developmental barriers
- emotional barriers and anxieties
- no one listened and no one asked: lack of recognition of abuse by others
- anxiety over the confidentiality of their information.
- Some young people described overlapping and multiple barriers to seeking help.

### 3.2.1 No one to turn to

A significant proportion of the young people (n=27, 45 per cent) described feelings of isolation in childhood, often stemming from poor family relationships and adverse family circumstances.

#### Isolation

Isolation was a common theme and related to both geographical and physical isolation, as well as psychological isolation. Some young people reported being isolated geographically; for some that meant living in the countryside with little contact with others apart from at school. Others felt that they were isolated because of their experiences: “I did speak to my friends at school and stuff, but they don’t really understand you know, they don’t understand” [female, emotional and physical abuse by mother up to the age of 17]. Several young people felt isolated because of their age: “There wasn’t really anyone to tell, you know. At primary school, you don’t really have friends like that because obviously you’re all at the same age” [female, sexually abused by older brother, at age seven]. Finally, although some young people felt that they did have an adult they trusted within their extended families, they rarely saw them because of geographical distance or poor inter-family relationships.

40 “Other” recipients of disclosure include two youth workers; a priest; a driving instructor; foster parents; and professionals from a voluntary sector service.

41 This will be described in further detail later in the report in section 3.4.5.



## What stops young people from disclosing abuse sooner?

### No one to turn to

**“I just had no one.”**

Suffering abuse left victims feeling isolated and alone.

### Developmental barriers

**“it was just one of those things you couldn't really explain.”**

Young people didn't know what was happening was abuse, or they didn't have the words to describe it.

### No one listened, no one asked

**“I never went and asked for help, but no one ever asked me.”**

The physical and emotional signs of abuse were there, but no one picked up on them.

### Anxiety and fear

**“I certainly, err, didn't want to be found out.”**

Feelings of shame, guilt or embarrassment stopped victims from telling someone about abuse sooner.

### Abuser's tactics

**“My mum was so good at twisting stuff.”**

Victims were manipulated and intimidated by their abuser.

### Confidentiality

**“I guess my faith was shattered a bit.”**

Previous experiences where young people's confidentiality was breached shattered their confidence in others.



### **Some children don't tell because they feel physically isolated from others**

Certain times of the year, such as summer and Christmas holidays, also intensified feelings of "being alone". This is particularly significant given that for many young people, school was a place they were safe and where they felt most "normal".

Everything got a lot worse, but then I had like, I just had no one then ... 'cause I weren't at school as well, 'cause it became the summer holidays.

Female, physical and sexual abuse by father and his friends, from age 7 to 14

### Unsupportive and poor family relationships

A significant proportion of the young people (n=42) described poor relationships with parents and carers which left them feeling as if they had no one to turn to. Family dynamics were characterised in the following ways:

- Abuse was often systematic within the family, usually being perpetrated by both parents and carers and all family members were being affected by it.
- One parent was perpetrating abuse while the other facilitated the abuse or knew about it and did nothing to intervene.
- One parent was perpetrating abuse while the other was unable to intervene/protect because of significant substance use and/or mental health problems.
- One parent was perpetrating abuse and the other parent was unwilling to intervene because of emotional ties to the perpetrator.

For 12 young people, some of these factors overlapped, which compounded their sense of isolation. Furthermore, these young people felt very strongly that they had no one to turn to. Other family members were notably unable to intervene or protect. Siblings were not a source of support because they were being abused as well; or they were step-siblings to whom the young person did not feel close; or they had run away from home. Extended family members were either not available to the young person because they lived far away, or they were seen by the young person to accept abuse within the family and therefore did not protect them. A commonality among these

12 young people was that most were no longer in contact with any of their family members at the time of their interview.

### Family stress

Five young people talked about family members being under significant stress which prevented them from telling anyone about the abuse. Disability of parents or of siblings, substance use by parents or by siblings, and parental mental health problems were some of the issues affecting families.

### **Family stresses can stop a child or young person from seeking help**

One young woman did not want to cause any stress for her mother who was already quite ill, which could result in additional health concerns.

My mum was qui-, mum's quite ill, and umm, when umm, she gets stressed her arthritis flares up so I was like conscious of not wanting to upset her.

Female, abused by neighbour from age five to six, and by her father at age 12 to 13

### Family relationships perceived as positive by young people

Family relationships that were perceived by young people to be positive, however, could also negatively affect decisions to disclose abuse. Seventeen young people described having a "good" relationship with at least one parent, even if another parent was perpetrating abuse. However, there were particular factors cited which prevented, or at least delayed, disclosure to their trusted family members. Fears about upsetting the family dynamics were evident in several accounts. Concerns about a parent's protective reaction could stop young people from seeking help. One young woman abused by a neighbourhood peer said that she knew that her father would "go mental" and she was concerned that he would end up in prison for attacking her perpetrator in retaliation. In a few accounts, although parents were generally seen to be protective, young people felt that open communication was actively discouraged by their parents or carers. Finally, in some cases, a trusted parent or carer was failing to intervene. This could produce a sense that abuse by the other parent was "normalised" and accepted by the family.

### Over-protective messages to children and young people can suppress disclosures

This young woman was sexually abused by an older cousin from the age of 9 to 13. She never disclosed directly, but wrote a letter which she kept in her bag. Her mother, who had also been sexually abused in childhood, found the letter. Her mother believed her and supported her, but was also “devastated” which was less helpful in supporting her. When asked, in the interviews, what a better response might have been, this young woman said:

Maybe parents not being like, what my parents were like and over the top, my mum going like ‘oh, I’d kill someone that touches my kid’ and stuff cause then it ... it makes the child not want to say instead of actually saying.

### “Perpetrator mask” – Perpetrators may manipulate others into believing the child is to blame

Some young people described perpetrators as possessing an ability to manipulate others into believing that they (the child) was to blame.

Yeah, to begin with when I was fairly young, it was hard for my nan to see it like obviously. She just saw it like that I was a child playing up and that’s why these things was happening. Because my mum was so good at twisting stuff, whoever it was I spoke to for, like, help it would be twisted around and I would just be like but uh ... (laughs), it’s like that.

Female, sexually abused by a neighbour and physical and emotional abuse by mother

## 3.2.2 Perpetrator tactics

Perpetrator manipulation and intimidation were unsurprisingly crucial in preventing young people from telling anyone about their abuse. Twenty-one young people described perpetrator actions which prevented them from disclosing. Some noted subtle manipulation techniques including:

- promises it would not happen again
- saying that it was “normal”
- telling them it was a secret
- telling them people would be angry
- telling them it was no one else’s business.

Perpetrators were also reported to use more forceful and intimidating techniques to silence the young people, including:

- actual violence
- the threat of violence
- threatening to harm/abuse someone else
- threatening to kill the child or young person.

## 3.2.3 Developmental barriers

The young people’s accounts suggest that developmental factors influenced their ability to disclose because they either did not recognise what was happening to them as abuse, or they did not possess the vocabulary to describe what was happening to them. This theme was fairly common among young people who experienced sexual abuse, regardless of whether they were abused by family members or non-family members. Some young people did not understand that anything was amiss:

It was just the norm for me sort of so I didn’t think anything was sort of wrong with what was going on until I’d gotten older

Female, sexual abuse by father, from age 4 to 14.

Others, however, reported that they knew something was “not right”, but they were not sure how to vocalise or investigate what they were experiencing:

So it kinda, the shyness and all that, it kinda stopped me from saying anything when I was younger, younger ... They would think ‘yeah, what? It’s normal don’t worry about it’ know what I mean, I, ay, yeah, it was that idea, it was that kind of idea ... Ay it was one of those things that you just couldn’t really work with, it was, couldn’t really, couldn’t really properly explain ... it was a case of, it happened, you knew it happened in secrecy, because he made a point of making it happen in secrecy, you also knew that it was wrong, it just didn’t feel right, but you didn’t really cross the border to actually say to someone else ‘look, does this, is this actually right?’

Female, sexually abused by grandfather, from age 5 to 16



### Children may believe that physical abuse is just a part of parental discipline

One young man, physically and emotionally abused by his father throughout childhood and adolescence, did not realise for a long time that his father's violence was not a normal disciplinary strategy.

I was pushed about quite a lot. But again, like at the time, it was just weird, 'cause at the time it was ... and even up until six or seven years ago, I just kind of thought that it was boisterous and it was just hands-on parenting. And then you, sort of, speak to other people and realise that hands-on parenting is like a smack on the bum every six months because you've done something really bad not, sort of, being pushed towards the top of the stairs and being absolutely petrified, like every other weekend.

Male, witnessed domestic violence between mother and step-father; was also physically and emotionally abused by both parents.

### 3.2.4 Emotional barriers and anxieties

Feelings of shame, guilt or embarrassment stopped 12 young people from telling others about the abuse. This theme was only found in the accounts by young people who experienced sexual abuse and was a particularly strong theme among the young men. Several young people who experienced other forms of abuse, particularly family violence, alluded to these emotions when describing the fact that they rarely invited friends over to the house when they were young.

I didn't want to cause anyone any distress, and I certainly didn't want to be err, found out. I suppose. And so, that's why I only told them a very small part of the story to start with. And that, the reaction to that was bad enough, so I umm, I would never have considered police involvement. Even if I was old enough to think about it.

Male, sexual abuse by babysitter, from age 9 to 11

#### Individual factors

Several specific individual barriers were present which stopped young people from disclosing their abuse. Mental health difficulties, for example, stopped three young people from disclosing. Two of these young people were suffering from severe depression, and one was suicidal and self-harming, all of which

prevented them from reaching out for help because they felt overwhelmed.

Anxieties about how others might react stopped at least 14 young people from seeking help, and these themes were present in the accounts of both groups. Although young people did not attribute these anxieties to a particular source, their broader accounts often reflected isolation, lack of support at home, lack of close friendships and a lack of trust generally. These anxieties may well be impacts of the abuse and betrayal they experienced and therefore may have been grounded in a realistic context.

Anxiety often revolved around the following themes:

- worry about the reaction of the person they told
- worry that they would not be believed
- worry that they would be blamed
- worry that they would be labelled as a problematic child or adolescent
- worry that they were making a big deal out of what was going on
- worried about retaliation by the perpetrator(s)
- distrust in professionals and how they would respond.

#### “Problematic teenagers”

A number of the young people said that in their adolescence, they were coping with significant levels of emotional distress which manifested in depression, suicidal ideation and self-harm. As a result, these young people had engaged with professionals such as GPs, psychiatrists and counsellors for help. However, most describe adverse experiences with these professionals whom they believe failed to recognise the signs and instead, blamed the young person.

I've told the doctor. I hate doctors. Went in several times and said OK something is wrong, I need some help – I cut myself, I feel entirely depressed, I've tried to kill myself. Every time they'd just say I'm being silly and to go home and grow up.

Female, physical and emotional abuse by mother; witnessing domestic violence; and being bullied in school

### 3.2.5 No one listened and no one asked

Some young people felt invisible and ignored when they were younger, which prevented them from seeking help. Four young people described how they tried to tell others, often indirectly, but no one



picked up on their disclosure. These four young people all described a poor relationship with their parent or caregiver. The young people also described numerous signs and signals which indicated abuse but which were not acknowledged, including: physical injuries such as bruises and scrapes; physical injuries resulting from self-harm; rapid weight-loss; behavioural signs such as acting out or becoming withdrawn, being depressed and attempting suicide.

#### **Children and young people want others to notice**

One young woman describes how her mother didn't understand or acknowledge the message she was trying to convey and how her own emotional barriers stopped her from being able to say what was happening directly.

Sometimes when I was talking to me Mam I was trying to sort of leave hints and stuff but I was just so embarrassed about was going on and it was really just the thought of saying anything was embarrassing and felt really like ashamed and that kind thing so ... Erm, yeah I did try and get it across to her a few times but it just wasn't happening but that wasn't any surprise to me.

**Female, sexual abuse by step-father, from age 4 to 14; and emotional neglect by mother**

The young people's accounts suggest that proactive intervention by others may have helped at the time they were experiencing abuse, which supports other emerging evidence of the importance of other people in the child's educational and social environment asking questions to prompt or provide children with an opportunity to tell.<sup>42</sup> Seven young people said that they did not disclose because "no one asked". All of these young people believed that there were signs of abuse that someone should have picked up on.

We first lived with them (her grandparents) and then we lived quite near them and we used to spend a lot of time together. But I never really erm, I never really, I didn't understand what was wrong and I never went and asked for help, but no one ever asked me if I needed help and I think, looking back it was, like, I don't know, kind of the indicators you get if someone's being abused were there.

**Female, sexually abused by older cousin, from age 8 to 12**

### 3.2.6 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was identified as important by a number of the young people; however only a small number reported that concern about confidentiality was a key reason which prevented their disclosures to certain professionals. Two young people had concerns about the safety of their personal information, borne from direct experiences with teachers who they perceived to be frivolous with that information. One young woman who had been sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend at the age of 13 to 14 had exhibited behavioural problems in school which the teacher discussed with the whole class. This convinced her that anything she told the teacher would not be safe.

I guess my faith in that (confidentiality) was shattered a bit, like when I mentioned before about the teacher saying in class, kind of when I wasn't present about that I was like just trying to behave for attention and that kind of thing so, it was a very kind of close-knit community in the school and I didn't feel like my problems were necessarily gonna be respected, like confidentiality was gonna be respected.

Two young people had negative experiences with a social worker and a counsellor after disclosure. They felt their confidentiality had been breached when they discovered that information they had shared was repeated back to a parent. In one of these cases, the parent was also an abuser and this caused the young person to shut down and refuse to say anything further.

Four young people were not aware that confidential services such as ChildLine or other helplines existed. They all said that had they known, it is possible that they would have contacted these services. One young woman said that she would have had to have been absolutely certain of the confidential nature of a service before making contact.

If I had known it was completely confidential, I would've phoned ChildLine. Just so I had someone to talk to.

**Female, physically abused by mother and witnessed domestic violence until the age of 16**

Three young people, however, were clear that assurances of confidentiality would not have been enough at the time of their abuse to encourage them to disclose to any professional. Other factors such as fear of the perpetrator or fear of what a disclosure would do to the family were more important in their determination to remain silent. One young woman did

42 McGee H, Garavan R, deBarra M, Byrne J, Conroy R. (2002). *The SAVI Report: Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland*. The Liffey Press: Dublin; McElvaney R, Greene S, Hogan D. (2012). Containing the secret of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 27(6):1155–1175. DOI: 10.1177/0886260511424503; Jensen TK, Gulbrandsen W, Mossige S, Reichelt S, Tjersland OA. 2005. Reporting possible sexual abuse: A qualitative study on children's perspectives and the context for disclosure. *Child Abuse & Neglect* 29(12): 1395–1413.



reflect, however, that she felt age was an important factor. When she was younger, aged seven or eight, she was too frightened to disclose, but at an older age (over 12) she may have considered contacting a service that she knew was confidential.

## 3.3 What are the key factors that promoted disclosure?

### Key insights

- Six themes emerged as key factors that promoted disclosure:
- intervention by others (being asked, noticed)
- developmental changes, particularly learning about healthy relationships and sex education
- emotional needs
- changes in nature of abuse
- protecting others
- remembering forgotten abuse.

Many of the young people in this study lacked a supportive environment at home and felt isolated and alone with no one to turn to. The factors which “promoted” disclosure came from numerous sources but were largely unrelated to having trusting adults or other informal support available. Young people describe being compelled to disclose for a range of reasons. These young people experienced multiple and overlapping forms of abuse, both in the home and community, and faced immense barriers to seeking help. Key in this process of disclosure for some of the young people was other people taking an active interest and noticing physical and behavioural signs and signals. These people who “noticed” were not necessarily *perceived* as informal support, but when they took active notice, it opened an opportunity for the young person to tell someone what was happening.

This section addresses the question: What changed for young people that compelled them to overcome those barriers and disclose their abuse? This section describes the accounts of 47 young people<sup>43</sup> who told why they disclosed.

### 3.3.1 Intervention by others

As discussed in the section on barriers, some young people wanted someone to notice that they were struggling and to ask them directly if they were having problems. Previous research has also noted the positive effect of direct inquiry about abuse.<sup>44</sup>

Twelve young people disclosed because someone asked them if they were being abused, or noticed behavioural changes or physical injuries and spoke to them about it. Eleven disclosed sexual abuse; eight during the period of abuse and three in adolescence after the abuse had stopped.

I told them because they said to me, ‘If you tell us that someone’s done that to you, you’ll never have to see them again. We’ll keep you safe.’ So, I suddenly thought that, you know, it was all going to be over, thought if I tell them the truth, and then they saw the bruises on me as well. I thought if I tell them the truth and I even remember the social worker who was taking me to hospital saying, ‘It’s ok, you know, you never have to see them again. Just tell us what’s happened.’ So when I did, I really did think I was going to be safe.

Female, sexual and physical abuse by father, age unknown

#### Noticing changes in children and young people

One young woman disclosed abuse because others were beginning to notice problems that she was having, even though she was not asked outright if she was being abused. People close to her were beginning to notice changes in behaviour or attitude, or noticed injuries resulting from self-harm.

One of my friends at school was really worried about me and um, for a while the school had known I’d been cutting myself, um and people had noticed my weight loss as well, but at the time it wasn’t a big deal because I was overweight to begin with so I think people kind of saw it as a good thing to begin with that I was losing weight, um, and the first time they got involved was after I told the Head of Year that ‘things weren’t good at home’.

Female, sexual abuse by father, from age unknown until 15

43 One young person was excluded because they could not recall why they disclosed and 12 young people did not disclose abuse. The 47 are made up of 37 young people who experienced sexual abuse and 10 who experienced other forms of abuse. Several participants disclosed multiple times and provided different reasons for disclosing and therefore the themes add up to greater than 47.  
44 Lanktree, C., Briere, J. and Zaidi, L. (1991) ‘Incidence and Impact of Sexual Abuse in a Child Outpatient Sample: The Role of Direct Inquiry’, *Child Abuse and Neglect* 15: 447–53.

## What helped young people to disclose abuse?

### Someone intervened

**“School had known I’d been cutting myself, and people noticed my weight loss.”**

Someone noticed injuries or a change in behaviour that triggered them to ask if the young person was being abused. Once asked, young people felt they could talk.

### Realisation that abuse was wrong

**“I got the impression this wasn’t what everyone else was doing.”**

The realisation that abuse wasn’t ‘normal’ lead some young people to get help.

### No longer able to cope

**“I just broke down one day. I was sick of getting bullied at school and I was sick of getting bullied at home.”**

Some young people simply couldn’t cope on their own anymore.

### Change in the nature of abuse

**“It got to the point where I couldn’t take it anymore”**

When abuse became more violent, aggressive and frequent, it drove young people to reach out and get help.

### Protecting others

**“I remember just looking across the room to my little sister and just thinking I’ve got to protect her.”**

Some were worried that if they didn’t say anything, other children – usually a sibling – could be abused too.

### 3.3.2 Developmental changes

For 12 young people, developmental changes prompted them to disclose their abuse. A key barrier to disclosure was the young person's inability to name what was happening to them as abuse when they were very young. Some young people reported that they lacked the vocabulary to describe the abuse. Others felt that they had no reference point to help them understand that what was happening to them did not happen to other children, therefore believing it was "normal" or "acceptable". Others sensed intuitively that it was wrong because it *felt* wrong or because it happened in secret, but they lacked either the confidence or a pathway to investigate if they were right. Seven young people who experienced sexual abuse made the decision to seek help in stopping it once they came to understand that what was happening to them was wrong. A further three young people whose sexual abuse had already ended decided to seek help after they became aware that it was wrong. One young person who had experienced significant other forms of abuse also came to realise that this was not normal. The realisation that what they were experiencing was not normal did not happen overnight for these young people. They described a process in which they began to understand gradually, contextualising their own experiences with new information about family and intimate relationships. This involved:

- contextualising the relationship with the perpetrator
- learning about sex in school or through television programmes
- becoming more aware of intimacy in the context of adolescent relationships
- speaking to friends about their friends' experiences.

#### The positive impact of sex education

One young woman was sexually abused by her cousin from the age of 8 to 12. She describes how she began to understand that her abuse was not commonly experienced by others.

And then, like at school when we used to have classes, and on TV and stuff there's always, there's always stuff on TV about it, and I think I kind of, I got the impression that this wasn't what anyone else was doing.

Female, sexual abuse by cousin, from age 8 to 12

### 3.3.3 Emotional needs

Seventeen young people reported that they decided to disclose because they were no longer able to cope with the abuse on their own.

#### The emotional impacts of cumulative experiences of abuse

For some young people, the cumulative effects of the multiple forms of abuse eventually led them to disclose.

I just broke down one day 'cause I was sick of getting bullied (at school) and I was sick of getting bullied at home, there was nowhere really I could go and I just wanted to be left alone. So I got really upset and broke down in the nurses' office.

Female, physical, emotional and sexual abuse by father, bullying at school, sexual abuse by step-brother, from age seven to adolescence.

### 3.3.4 Changing patterns of abuse

For three young people the changes in the patterns of abuse, such as the abuse becoming more aggressive and violent or more frequent, acted as a catalyst for them to disclose abuse. This suggests that the young person may have been making some calculation of risk. It was not uncommon for young people to report increased aggression and violence from their perpetrator over time, particularly for those who were being sexually abused. For some young people, the escalation in the abuse was related to developmental changes. They were becoming more knowledgeable and vocal and demonstrating greater resistance to the abuse:

I think like he kind of, he would like step it up a level like gradually and I, one point it just got to the point where I just couldn't really take any more and at that point I kind of had the courage to fight, fight against it and tell my mum.

Female, sexual abuse by mother's boyfriend, from age 13 to 14

I was being abused at the time of becoming a diabetic, and then when I was twelve I told my best friend what was actually happening at home, because I had a particularly horrible experience.

Female, sexual and physical abuse by father, from age 11 to 16





### 3.3.5 Protecting others

Three young people reported that motivating factors for disclosing abuse were concerns that other children may be abused. Most often, disclosures prompted by concerns for others were usually made in later adolescence after their own abuse had ended.

#### Protecting a sibling

One young man was abused by the son of his babysitter from age 9 to 11. The son was often left in charge if the babysitter needed to go out, and it was during this time that the abuse occurred. This young man did not tell anyone because he was ashamed and blamed himself for the abuse, a result of manipulation by the perpetrator. The perpetrator used threats to control him, particularly with reference to his brother:

During the time that she wasn't there, he would umm, well he would basically, he would rape me. And, anything else that took his fancy. Err. And, if I sort of resisted it he would go after my brother instead, so I always put myself up for it.

When the young person turned 11, his mother said he did not have to go to the babysitter's house any longer as he was getting old enough to stay at home on his own. However, his brother still had to go, and it was this change in his childhood circumstance that catalysed his disclosure (albeit a partial disclosure):

And this continued for, you know, about, 'til I was about, 10 or 11. Well it must have been ... starting secondary school. 'Cause my mum then said I didn't have to go down there anymore. Err. 'Cause I was, you know, old enough to go up to the house on my own. But my brother still had to go. So it was at that time that I ... I umm, I tried to tell them what had happened. And, I, I couldn't say, I couldn't say it very well. I didn't, I didn't, do a particularly good job ... but, well, it did the job. It stopped.

### 3.3.6 Remembering forgotten abuse

Finally, remembering forgotten abuse prompted two young people to disclose. One young woman then disclosed her abuse to friends and a counsellor. She had blocked out sexual abuse by her cousin's step-father for many years until he committed suicide. It was later revealed that the family always had suspicions about him but no one had intervened to protect her or her cousin, who was also abused.

## 3.4 Spotlight on key areas

This section draws out key learning from the young people's accounts of their experiences in disclosing abuse. It focuses on the most common formal and informal sources for disclosure:

- friends
- mothers
- the education system (teachers)
- the criminal justice system (the police and courts)
- social services.

In each key area, insights and learning will be drawn from both positive and negative experiences.

### 3.4.1 Friends

#### Key insights

- Friends were a very important source of emotional, practical and moral support.
- Friends were aware of worrying changes in behaviour.
- Young people need information on how to respond to a friend who is distressed.

Friends were a critical source of support for many of the young people in this study. Not all young people disclosed their abuse to their friends, but of those who did, most said that they received the support they were looking for at the time. A few young people experienced very negative responses from friends, including disbelief and friends turning on them.

Not only were friends sources for disclosure and support, importantly, young people reported that their friends were the first to recognise when something was wrong. Of those who disclosed sexual abuse under the age of 18 (n=38), 14 young people had made 16 disclosures to friends. Nearly all instances of sexual abuse disclosures to friends were direct and verbal; although two were impulsive and one was prompted by a friend. All were delayed. Seven disclosures were made to friends in order to seek help in stopping abuse; five were made in seeking only emotional support; three disclosures were made by young people who were uncertain what help they were seeking, only that they were compelled to tell; and one was made to protect a sibling.

Eight young people, half of those who experienced other forms of abuse, initially disclosed abuse to friends in childhood or adolescence. The majority (n=5) disclosed physical abuse by a parent or sibling; one disclosed emotional abuse and neglect; one disclosed domestic violence; and one confided in



friends about intimate partner violence. All eight were direct verbal disclosures, were delayed, and were seeking emotional support only.

Disclosure to friends across both groups of young people most often occurred in adolescence<sup>45</sup> with only three instances of disclosure to friends under the age of 12 reported. One explanation for so few disclosures to friends at younger ages was the perception that friends would be unable to help because of their age. As one participant said:

... my friends, you're just like kids innit so you can't really do much.

**Female, witnessed domestic violence by mother's partners from age 5 to 15**

### Friends recognise worrying behaviour

Friends noticed changes in behaviour, signs of self-harm, weight-loss and depression, even if they did not know about the abuse. Fourteen young people described how friends "picked up" that something was going on. Sometimes friends confronted the young person about this, providing a critical opportunity for them to tell about their abuse. In a few cases, friends took it upon themselves to seek help, for example, by calling ChildLine to talk about their concerns and find out how they could help. An older adult, considered to be a friend of one young person, also sought help by speaking to the NSPCC helpline in addition to contacting social services.

#### **Children and young people need information on how to respond to a friend who is distressed**

This young woman was sexually and physically abused by her mother's partner from age 13 to 14. Her friends did notice her distress.

I did discuss it with some friends afterwards (after disclosing to a parent) ... I don't think they really knew what to do with it, 'cause we were all very young ... Erm, they kind of, they'd very much picked up on the change in my behaviour and I remember one of them suggested after having kind of been, I guess been worried about me and talking to her mum, like see a counsellor, but I was very defensive about that, erm, so I guess they, they kind of tried to be supportive, but at the same time, my personality completely changed erm, and I kind of isolated myself from them, around that point.

### Friends provide emotional support

Some young people only sought emotional support from friends. They were clear that, at the time, they were not ready to formally report the abuse and only wanted someone to talk to. They trusted that their friends would respect their wishes and provide emotional support, such as space to talk about what was going on. Knowing that friends "were there" was enough for some young people who were not ready to disclose abuse. A young man who was sexually abused at the age of nine by his babysitter described how his male friend would "debrief" with him after counselling sessions when he was 16. The thing he most appreciated was the "logical" support his friend provided:

He's very much umm, sort of dispassionate, logical sort of approach, like me. And that's what I like to have, a sort of a proper discussion about it. It's not much use to me to sit with somebody who has, you know, all the best interests in the world, heart of gold all the rest of it, but they just go 'aww'.

This young man was very clear about the type of emotional support he needed as he also disclosed to his girlfriend whose approach was more emotional, but not particularly what he was seeking. Another young woman received significant emotional support by speaking to her friend "online". She could not say the words directly, but found she could tell her friend on MSN messenger. When she would see her friend after they discussed it online, her friend would hug her, which let her know that her friend cared.

#### **The importance of emotional support**

A friend of a young woman noticed a change in her personality and provided much-needed emotional support. This young woman had been abused by her 16-year-old brother when she was aged seven.

I told her ... umm, probably about three years ago now I suppose. Umm, 'cause she she'd sort of noticed that I was, I'd sort of become a little bit withdrawn because I was going back to doing some counselling and some therapy. Umm. And obviously that sort of changed my behaviour for a little while. Umm. And she sort of said, oh is there anything you wanna talk about. You know and everything and ... you know, I gave her the option, and, and, I gave her the option and said, 'look, yeah, I will tell you because I trust you, you know, and

45 Over the age of 12.

I don't have a problem, and I know you won't say anything. You know, you're not gonna go blurting it from the rooftops, but, I will tell you now, it's not exactly the most, easy of things to hear' ... and you know, she did, we sat on the sofa together, we cried together and laughed together and ... everything.

### Friends provide practical support

Young people in both groups reported that friends provided important practical support when it was most needed. Friends invited young people to their homes when they knew things were bad for them at home. In adolescence, a few young people were "sofa surfing" with friends because they could not go home, yet were not receiving support from children's services. In a few cases, young people stayed with friends during Christmas or summer holidays to be away from home.

### Friends provide moral support

Friends accompanied five of the young people who had experienced sexual abuse on visits to court, counselling appointments and/or appointments with the school nurse. These were friends whom the young person trusted implicitly and to whom they had disclosed abuse. One friend even investigated different counselling services on behalf of the young person.

### Friends assist the disclosing of abuse

Friends provided positive assistance to the young person in disclosing the abuse to others. In some cases, they acted as a conduit between the young person and an adult, and sought help on their behalf, most often a teacher but in a few examples the police. One young woman who had experienced physical abuse from her step-father and witnessed domestic violence between her parents explained that her friend was aware that things were not right with her and had assisted her in disclosing to a teacher:

Well I got forced to tell her [the teacher], 'cause one of my friends knew stuff was going on, so, got her in and we talked about it, erm, and erm, she told my head teacher.

In other cases friends provided moral support by being present when the young people disclosed to an adult. These were most often perceived as supportive acts by friends, even if the longer term experience of disclosure was not a pleasant one.

### Friends provide physical protection

Three young people who experienced other forms of abuse reported that the likelihood of physical abuse was reduced when friends were spending time at their homes, in one case because friends would intervene:

My friends I think were the most important thing and it's just, you know like erm, it's really, really valuable I think to have, 'cause I, you know I have like a lot of friends, a lot of really close friends and they were all fully aware of it, they would come round and play and my brother would come in and st, start being an idiot basically, you know, try and bully me or hit me or just, yeah whatever and erm, I had like a couple of good friends who would just stick up for me.

### Male, physical and emotional bullying by brother until age 17

### Friends may not know how to react

In a small number of cases, young people said that once their friends had become aware of the abuse, that they withdrew or did not believe that it happened. The young people themselves reflected on this, suggesting that these reactions may have occurred because they (their friends) did not understand abuse or how to "deal with" the disclosure. For example, two young people reported that their friends reacted negatively to disclosures of sexual abuse, including publically turning on them, which then adversely impacted on those young people's future decisions to disclose. This suggests a need to raise awareness among all young people about the dynamics and consequences of abuse as well as promote messages about how friends might respond or help.

## 3.4.2 Mothers

### Key insights

- More than half of the disclosures to mothers were to stop the abuse.
- Some mothers did try to take protective action to stop the abuse by attempting to stop contact with the perpetrator or by reporting to the police.
- Positive experiences of disclosing to mothers were characterised by belief in the disclosure, taking protective action, listening to what the young person wants to happen and providing emotional support.
- Negative experiences of disclosing to mothers were characterised by disbelief in the disclosure, accusations of lying or ignoring the disclosure.

Mothers were the recipients of 32 initial or linked disclosures made under the age of 18 by 30 of the young people. Of those who experienced sexual abuse, 15 young people made 17 initial disclosures to mothers, and an additional eight young people told mothers after they had told someone else first. Of those reporting other abuse experiences, six first turned to their mothers and one additional person told their mother after they had disclosed to someone else. Most were direct verbal disclosures, although some were indirect and non-verbal, behavioural, most of which occurred under the age of 10. More than half of the disclosures to mothers were made in order to stop the abuse. The disclosures for emotional support occurred within adolescence. For these young people, disclosures to mothers were largely adverse experiences. Given that for many of these young people, mothers were part of the problem, this outcome is unsurprising. Young people described complex and chaotic home environments in which mothers were either aware at some level that abuse was going on or they were also perpetrating some form of abuse themselves. Some of these mothers were experiencing domestic violence. Research has indicated that there is a high co-occurrence of domestic violence and child sexual abuse, and this family dynamic has significant implications for both disclosure and response. Some research has reported that survivors of child sexual abuse who also witnessed domestic violence did not disclose their abuse because they feared the response of the perpetrator. The research also found that the response of mothers who themselves experienced domestic violence to disclosure could be ambivalent and less supportive of their child.<sup>46</sup>

### Informal protective action

Four young people's initial disclosures to mothers resulted in protective action although the mothers did not report the perpetrator to the police. The relationship to the perpetrator and the quality of these relationships may have some bearing on why the mothers took the action that they did. All of these mothers believed their children's disclosures, although the outcomes of their action were not always supportive. Two perpetrators were mothers' partners; one immediately separated from the perpetrator while the other one confronted the perpetrator and eventually asked him to leave the house (though this took some time). The young person reports that the mother maintains active contact with him.

The other two perpetrators were not mothers' partners. For one of the four young people, the perpetrator was her grandfather and she described

that her family was "very close", which may explain why the mother was reluctant to report her own father. The other perpetrator was a teenage babysitter, and the young person's mother took action by confronting the family and stopping contact. The young person only partially disclosed what had occurred, leaving out all mention of contact sexual abuse, which may explain why his mother never felt the need to contact the police.

Another two young people felt that while their mothers provided emotional support and they recognised their mothers' attempts to protect, they wished that their mothers had done more to bring the perpetrators to justice. Two other young people felt that their mothers had tried to protect them but they felt they had received no helpful emotional support because their mothers would not discuss their experiences.

### Formal protective action after initial disclosures

Five young people who made initial disclosures to their mothers said that their mothers took protective action by reporting the perpetrator to the police after their disclosures. For three of these young people, the perpetrators were non-family members or the abuser was not a parent or carer. For one young person, their mother was in a relationship with the perpetrator, although at the time of disclosure the perpetrator was in prison for an unrelated offence. For the other young person, the mother was in a relationship with the perpetrator but had been experiencing systematic abuse herself, and this may have been taken by her as an opportunity to end the relationship.

### Initial disclosures ignored, denied or not recognised

Five young people reported that they disclosed to their mothers but four of these disclosures were denied or ignored and one was never recognised as a disclosure. Relationship and family contexts are important to understand for the denied or ignored disclosures, as maternal responses to the disclosures were particularly poor. Three of the perpetrators were the young person's biological father or step-father with whom their mothers had relationships at the point of disclosure; in the fourth case, the perpetrator was an older step-brother (the son of the mother's partner with whom she was still living). For all four of these young people, mothers were also reported to have been perpetrators of physical or emotional abuse, and some were experiencing domestic violence. All four young people described particularly poor relationships with their mothers.

46 Alaggia, R. and Turton, J. (2005) 'Against the Odds: The impact of woman abuse on maternal response to disclosure of child sexual abuse', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 14(4): 95-113.

### The impact of ignoring disclosures

A young woman who experienced severe sexual and physical abuse by her father tried to tell her mother, who refused to hear what she was saying. The young woman explained that her father was incredibly controlling and held sway over her mother which is possibly a reason for her mother's refusal to acknowledge it, though she clearly holds a great deal of anger at her mother for this.

And I was about nine or ten and I remember sitting there and saying to her 'I hate him. You don't know what he's capable of' cause this was after he'd abused me as well, and it was almost as if she didn't, she kind of had an inkling, but didn't want to hear it 'cause she was trying to shut me up, and I was like, I was saying things like 'I hope he dies, I hope he gets in a car accident and dies on the way home.' And I was being deadly serious, now to me, for a 10 year old to be saying that about, about any adult, not only a parent, you'd be thinking 'What the hell?', but she just quickly shut me up, and when I was like 'You don't know what he's capable of!', she's like 'let's not, let's not go there. Let's not worry about it, just apologise.' And that was the day I kind of realised that there was no, no trusting her, no, no nothing.

Female, sexual abuse by father from age seven to eight, domestic violence between parents from infancy to adolescence, emotional neglect from mother throughout.

### Fears and anxieties about disclosure

Thirteen young people told their mothers about their abuse, but only after telling someone else first. Some had been worried that they would not be believed or would be blamed for the abuse, which is why they did not disclose in the first instance to their mothers. Most of these disclosures occurred after the abuse had stopped. Five young people received supportive reactions from their mothers to the disclosure and the mother supported the young person emotionally. Two young people, who experienced other forms of abuse, said their families were already aware of the family or interpersonal violence but that no formal intervention was taken. The remainder received generally poor responses from mothers either because the mother was also perpetrating abuse or was unable to cope with the information at the time due to substance use or mental health issues.

### Learning from experiences of disclosing to mothers

Positive and helpful reactions by mothers included:

- immediate faith in the disclosure
- taking formal protective action by reporting to the police or supporting a previously made disclosure to the police
- provision of emotional and moral support through talking
- accompanying the young person to counselling and/or video testimony
- respecting the young person's wishes by having asked and listened to what was wanted.

Unsupportive reactions included:

- mothers not believing the disclosures
- accusations of lying or "attention seeking"
- simply not talking to the participant about it and pretending it had not happened.

### 3.4.3 Education

#### Key insights

- Positive disclosure experiences with teachers and wider education staff occurred where young people were automatically believed, where teachers reported the abuse through appropriate channels.
- Positive support from a teacher can have an important emotional impact.
- The failure of teachers to inform the young person of how they would handle the disclosure left the young person in suspense and fearful about what would happen next.
- Some teachers went straight to the parents who were the perpetrators of abuse or who were aware of and/or enabled the abuse in some way.

Among the young people in the study, 18 made a total of 23 disclosures to teachers. Table 9 indicates when both initial and linked disclosures to teachers were made. Disclosure to teachers was predominantly direct, verbal and purposeful with the aim of seeking help to stop abuse, although there were a few examples of prompted disclosures. One young person told a teacher about abuse that occurred in the past after she recovered a memory of it that was triggered by another family member disclosing abuse by the same perpetrator. At least one young woman had



**Table 9: Initial and linked disclosures made by young people to educational professionals**

	Disclosure by young people who experienced sexual abuse to education professionals	Disclosures by young people who experienced other forms of abuse to education professionals
Total initial disclosures	11	1
During period of abuse	9	1
After abuse ended	2	-
Total linked disclosures	9	2
During period of abuse	8	-
After abuse ended	1	2
<b>Total disclosures to teachers</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>3</b>

emotional support from a friend who assisted her in telling a teacher.

Young people chose teachers when disclosing for a variety of reasons. Some said that they trusted their teachers. A few believed that because they were professionals they could help. A small number were prompted by teachers who had noticed behaviour or other signs and who then provided them with an opportunity to talk. Some young people could not articulate why they chose their teachers. The majority of those who told teachers also reported unsupportive family relationships which is likely to have prompted help-seeking approaches to teachers. However, even a few young people who felt they were supported at home still turned to their teachers first.

### Positive support from teachers

Six of the disclosures to teachers were experienced as largely positive by the young people concerned. Positive disclosure experiences with teachers and wider education staff occurred where young people were automatically believed, where teachers reported the abuse through appropriate channels<sup>47</sup> and where the young person was kept informed. For a few young people, teachers provided other help such as support with school work, leniency when young person felt upset at school and in one case, a teacher accompanied a young woman to her first counselling session to provide emotional support. For many of the young people, teachers and other education staff recognised and were aware of problems (such as self-harm or other behavioural signals) and provided supportive environments, even prior to that young person disclosing. These experiences were relatively straightforward; young people felt that they were believed and that their teachers took action. However, the follow-on to these disclosures was not always pleasant. Most of these six young people remember their teachers acting immediately, but the aftermath included involvement by police and social workers, some of whom invited the young person’s parents into

the room during the interviews. It is not easy to assess what role the teachers played in these meetings from young people’s accounts, however.

#### Positive support from a teacher can have an important emotional impact

One young woman was sexually abused by her older brother when she was nine over the course of a summer. She never told anyone until she was 15, when she was struggling to cope and her then boyfriend helped her to tell a teacher.

Well initially, the teacher, it was my science teacher. Umm, she, you know, found me. She came and sat me down. Umm. And obviously she found out a little bit more about what had gone on, how I was feeling at the time, and obviously then she had a, channels, that she had to follow, in terms of what I was saying to her. Umm ... she ... she was very good in the sense that she made teachers aware that there was something happening, so that, 'cause there was quite a lot of time after that, for about the next six months, where, I wasn't coping with a full lesson at a time. And I was then having to come out of lessons, which ... was really awkward for me because then I was also getting bullied from other people, saying, why are you crying all the time and ... you know, you're this, you're that, and they had absolutely no idea what was going on. Umm ... and ... she ... I'd, she, she just made it easy for me to go to her. Even if she was teaching another year or another class, I could just go and sit outside her room. She never, as much as she obviously ... she never broke my trust ... because she was always telling me ... what was the next stage, or what she had to do because of something I'd said.

47 To head teacher or police.



## Learning from poor experiences of disclosing to teachers

There were many examples of disappointing and distressing experiences with teachers from which we can draw some learning. A common source of distress for the young people was the unhelpful reporting practices carried out by teachers. There were several examples of the failure of teachers to inform the young person of how they would handle the disclosure, leaving the young person in suspense and fearful about what would happen next.

### The importance of informing children and young people of what happens after a disclosure

One young woman was sexually abused by an older half-brother from the age of 9 to 15. She found the courage to report her abuse to her teacher in a note. Positively the teacher believed her, but her response was less than optimal, leaving the young woman feeling guilty and regretting what she had done. Her parents were unsupportive and angry that she had talked to anyone outside of the family, and the resulting outcome was a retracted disclosure.

It was horrible having to walk home then, 'cause I was late home because I'd stayed behind after school to speak to her, so knew that I was gonna be asked questions as to where I'd been and why I was late home ... And all the walk home I was thinking, oh gosh, what's gonna happen and, I didn't know what was gonna happen other than the fact that my mum would probably find out. So then it was like, a huge set of emotions, and I felt so, I felt so guilty, I regretted it, I wanted to take back what I'd said, I knew that I was gonna get into trouble. Yeah. I just think if they'd have, if, if they'd have reacted just a lot differently. I don't, see, I don't understand why you know, when I put something quite as serious as what I did put on the piece of paper, just to kind of highlight how serious it was then, that she even kind of allowed me to go back home without having to speak to, without saying, stay there let me, let me just, even if she didn't want to say to me, I'm going to go and speak to the head teacher, who she, even if she just said like stay there and compose yourself whilst I nip off a minute. And gone and speak to somebody else, and then, discussed before I went back home as to whether I was going to be in danger again before I went back home or, those kind of things I felt should have been taken into consideration.

Perhaps most unhelpful, some teachers went straight to the parents who were the perpetrators of abuse or who were aware of and/or enabled the abuse in some way. A young woman who was living with domestic violence between her mother and her mother's partner for many years made the decision to tell a teacher at school. This disclosure only made things worse for her at home:

I told one [teacher]. I wrote her a letter. I wanted someone to do something. She told my mum. I remember mum picking me up from school and she dragged me out and shouted at me.

Finally two young people indirectly disclosed about their experiences but their teachers failed to recognise what the young people were trying to say. The young people admitted that their disclosures may have been vague which may explain why the teachers failed to pick up on them; however it also indicates a need for training in listening and hearing what a child is trying to say.

## 3.4.4 The criminal justice system

### Key insights

- Sexual abuse stirs shame, guilt and embarrassment for children and young people who experience it and therefore disclosing it will never be easy. This alone suggests that all police, who are potentially receivers of sexual abuse disclosures, should be well trained to deal with it sensitively.
- Negative accounts of police involvement highlighted the importance of keeping children and young people informed during the process of disclosing abuse and building a court case.
- Being direct when interviewing/talking to children and young people about sexual abuse was seen as helpful by the young people.
- For some young people, their parents were invited into the room during the police interview process, leading two of them to retract their earlier disclosures because of their parent's role in the abuse.

More than half of the young people (n=37) reported some involvement with the criminal justice system in childhood or adolescence. Twenty-seven of these young people made 40 disclosures to the police, most of which (n=36) were "linked" after telling someone else. Eleven young people (including one who also disclosed to the police) reported police involvement for other, in most cases related, reasons. Several young people reported that the police regularly came to their home to respond to reports of domestic

**Table 10: Police, court and conviction figures**

	Young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=44)	Young people who experience other forms of abuse disclosures (n=16)
Young people who disclosed to police	24	3
Disclosures to police during period of abuse	10	2
Disclosures leading to perpetrator arrest	9	2
Arrests leading to a court case	9	2
A court case leading to conviction	7	1
Disclosures to police after period of abuse	14	1
Disclosures leading to perpetrator arrest	11	1
Arrests leading to a court case	8	1
A court case leading to conviction	6	1

violence or ongoing neglect. One young person’s father was arrested for assaulting the perpetrator of his daughter’s sexual assault. Police were involved with four young people when responding to their behaviour which included running away from home, shoplifting, suspected arson and attempted suicide. Two young people became involved with the police after someone else disclosed sexual abuse by the same perpetrator. Finally, one young person’s mother, who was physically and emotionally abusing him, reported that young person to the police for defending himself against her.

The police received reports of sexual abuse from 24 young people; 10 during the period of abuse and a further 14 at some point after the abuse had stopped. These were usually linked disclosures, occurring after disclosing to someone else who reported, or helped the young person to report, the abuse. Table 10 shows that in less than half of these cases, police received reports during the period of abuse, most of which led to the arrest of the perpetrator. Seven of these went through a court case which ultimately led to the conviction of the perpetrator. Fourteen young people disclosed to police after their abuse ended, some still in adolescence but three in very recent months prior to the research interviews (2009–10).

### Police

Generally speaking, young people found the process of disclosing their abuse to the police, particularly in the case of sexual abuse, an uneasy and unpleasant one, even when they had the support of their friends or family. Sexual abuse stirs shame, guilt and embarrassment for children and young people who experience it and therefore disclosing it will never be easy. This alone suggests that all police, who are potentially receivers of sexual abuse disclosures, should be well trained to deal with it sensitively.

### Communication skills

It is unsurprising, then, that communication skills were crucial in both positive and negative accounts of police involvement. Four key areas were highlighted: being developmentally sensitive; being direct; allowing children to go at their own pace; and keeping children and young people informed.

Negative accounts of police involvement highlighted the importance of keeping children and young people informed during the process of disclosing abuse and building a court case. Three young people’s accounts suggested that they would have felt better informed if:

- the police inform children and their families when the perpetrator is to be arrested so that they can prepare for repercussions by the perpetrator’s family;
- the police<sup>48</sup> explain what is happening during the investigation and pre-trial phase to the young person directly as opposed to explaining it only to a parent or carer.

Young people also drew attention to developmentally sensitive engagement during interviews and investigations. One young woman liked the fact that the police treated her with respect due to her older age (15 years); this experience altered her initial perception of what the police would be like during the process:

*They were really good, like, the police officers that I had. Um, it’s quite funny because I was expecting big, bulky police officers in uniform, um, and I got quite, two quite nice, I got the male, the male, um, like detective CID guy, um, who at first I was quite intimidated by and quite, but he was, he was really good. Um, he talked to me like a young person, not like a stupid little kid.*

**Female, sexually abused by step-father, from age 7 to 16**

48 Young people also need to be informed during the court process, but that is not the responsibility of the police.

### **The importance of being developmentally sensitive – not just “age” sensitive**

One young woman was abused and sexually exploited by her father and an unknown number of additional men facilitated by him. She felt that the police acted insensitively, assuming she would have the vocabulary to describe her abuse at age 14, but she did not. She felt that she was treated as a trouble-maker and took several attempts at disclosure to the police, to psychiatric health staff and to voluntary sector services to identify that she was being sexually exploited.

I felt like they (the police) were getting really annoyed with me 'cause I didn't have the words for a lot of things. So I was trying to explain things to them, and they were just looking at me, and they were like, 'why don't you know what it's called?' And I was just, 'I don't know'. So, they said that I was a irrel- unreliable witness, because, I didn't have umm, the correct words. 'Cause what I'd been told, and then I was explaining something else.

Talking to professionals about abuse – particularly sexual abuse – can be daunting and provoke embarrassment when providing the intimate details necessary for giving evidence. One young woman highlighted “being direct” as a crucial factor in her experience with the police. This refers to being direct about parts of the body and actions by the perpetrator. Two different police officers interviewed her which allowed her to reflect on their different styles and she felt direct questioning reduced her discomfort during the interviews.

### **Being direct when interviewing/talking to children and young people about sexual abuse**

The overall impression of one young woman regarding her experiences with the police was largely positive. She disclosed sexual abuse to the police at age 17 and adeptly articulated what she wanted from the interview:

The police at first they were a bit more reserved about saying stuff, and I think if, if you're gonna ask someone something they're not gonna admit it unless you ask them straight. And she (female police officer, sic) said things like 'and, and did he touch you ... down there?' you know and I thought (sighs) 'stupid woman how do I answer this?' You know and she confused

me and embarrassed me and I thought 'I really can't say this'. Then the woman that I actually did the full interview with she directed me and asked me proper questions and I was like 'to be honest with you that's what I would have preferred'.

Female, sexually, physically and emotionally abused by father, from age 2 to 14

The first police officer's own embarrassment in questioning the young woman about the sexual abuse heightened her interviewee's embarrassment, and may well have underscored sexual abuse as a taboo subject. While this young woman's overall impression of the police was positive, this quote identifies clear implications for the training of all police officers, not only those with special roles in interviewing children and young people about abuse.

Finally, some young people flagged as important the pace of interviewing, as they described feeling “out of control” during the process of disclosure. Things began to happen quickly and many people, usually strangers, would become involved which served to overwhelm the young people. As the following extract indicates, the process may feel otherworldly to children once they have disclosed and therefore being sensitive to the child's needs is crucial:

It was, like, I was just waiting for somebody to, like, wake me up and I was going to go back into what my life was normally like. Um, the police interview on the Friday went on for hours, I think it lasted about four hours, um. Again the police, the two police officers were, they were really good, um, and didn't like rush me, they didn't, like, make me talk about things I really didn't, they just went at my pace.

Female, sexual abuse by step-father, from age 7 to 16

### *Interview environment*

The young people revealed that the interview environment was crucial in their experiences with the police. Specifically, the surroundings for interviewing children and young people are important in creating comfort and a feeling of safety. Three specific references to environment were made in the accounts: 1) speaking to children with parents present; 2) the physical location of interviews; and 3) providing video testimony.

Three young people reported that their parents were invited into the room during the police interview process, leading two of them to retract their earlier disclosures. Children should be provided with a safe and secure place to speak freely. One young woman who was sexually and physically abused by her father and by other multiple perpetrators. She initially disclosed to a teacher who facilitated contact with the relevant authorities. During this process however, she retracted her disclosure because police and social services invited her mother and father into the room during the interview. Her father had sexually abused her for many years, and had also facilitated other men in abusing her. She was, unsurprisingly, frightened about how her father would react if she told the police what happened in front of him and this led her to withdraw her earlier disclosure.

Only one young person mentioned the actual “room” for conducting interviews, but this speaks to the earlier point about developmentally sensitive interviewing. This young woman was 16 at the time she was making a statement at the police station and they put her in a room that was painted pink and filled with dolls, making her feel childlike and uncomfortable. It meant she felt no “connection” with the environment, which significantly impacted on her ease and comfort during the interviews.

Eight young people recalled that they provided video testimony to the police during their court cases. Most of the accounts were fairly neutral in description suggesting the experiences were neither positive nor negative, but rather something that had to be done. For example, one young woman said:

**It was scary, like having my mum downstairs and my sister and my niece and, it was a couple of hours I think we was up there (videoing testimony), I don't know it was ok, I just got on with it,**

**Female, sexually abused by her father from age 7 to 11**

One young woman remembers feeling very nervous during the interview and said that she was very aware that she was being recorded.

### **Sensitively supporting children and young people through video testimony**

The provision of sensitive support can make the generally unpleasant experience of giving evidence more comfortable. In this extract, hidden cameras and a supportive person accompanying the young woman made her video testimony a relatively positive one.

**It was really nice, because umm, we sat um, we sat in a room with video**

**cameras that were hidden so you didn't get too nervous and, talked through what happened. And they reviewed it, and they said we'd use this tape in court so you wouldn't even have to go into court to see him, so. It was a really, almost comforting experience, umm, that I had with them, they were really nice. I mean I had, my counsellor even dropped me at the police house, so I didn't even have to find my way there, and it was, and they dropped me home again. So it was, you know, it wasn't too, too daunting.**

**Female, sexually abused by teenage nephew of mother's live-in boyfriend, from age 9 to 11**

## **Court**

Less information was obtained on court experiences than was the case for experiences with the police. However, where young people spoke about their memories of going to court, a common complaint was unsatisfactory sentencing or outcomes. Four young people felt that they were uninformed throughout the duration of the court process, but it was not always clear to the young person who was responsible for keeping them informed. The recollections of court were somewhat hazy, which could be a result of those experiences being frightening and overwhelming for the young people. Regardless, the current Victim's Code<sup>49</sup> which came into force in 2006 sets out as the minimum standard of service that victims should be provided with timely and accurate information about their case, and that because of the nature and sensitivity of child sexual abuse cases, prosecutors and the police should go beyond the minimum requirements.

One young woman who had been sexually and physically abused by her father and step-father was called to testify at a court case relating to domestic violence. The perpetrator was on trial for the attempted murder of her mother, not for the sexual or physical abuse. The authorities were, at that point, unaware of the abuse she experienced. However, she felt very strongly that she was uninformed about what she was expected to do in the courtroom:

**No one told me what it was or anything ... I thought I was going to school but um, yeah I had a school uniform on and, so I thought ... I didn't have a clue.**

This suggests the need to communicate with children and young people about what they can expect in court.

49 Criminal Justice System (2006). *The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*. [www.cps.gov.uk/victims\\_witnesses/victims\\_code.pdf](http://www.cps.gov.uk/victims_witnesses/victims_code.pdf)



One of the young women who disclosed sexual abuse to the police went to trial but felt let down because she and her family were given poor advice about charges which, in the end, meant that her perpetrator avoided prison.

So well in the end he got found guilty of the less serious ones (charges, sic), but then he like appealed or something and well he said that if erm, he, like, somebody like ... they said to me if I dropped the more serious charges he'd definitely go to prison anyway and then I wouldn't have to go back into court. So I did, but then erm, he had to go to prison and then he appealed and erm it was really, really stupid and they said that he erm, they couldn't prove that he was dangerous now because we'd dropped those charges so then he didn't go to prison. So, he's, now he says he's gonna kill me.

Female, emotionally and physically abused by both parents through adolescence, sexually abused by older cousin from age 9 to 15

### 3.4.5 Social services

#### Key insights

- Even those young people whose families were already involved with social services made no initial disclosure to social workers.
- There continues to be a negative view of what might happen when social workers become involved.
- Young people want social workers to “ask the right questions”; young people might have disclosed abuse if social workers had taken more time to get to know them, assessed their whole environment rather than the present issue for which they are involved, and asked them directly about abuse.

More than half the young people (n=34) reported that social services had been involved with their

families in childhood or adolescence, although this involvement was not always in response to an abuse disclosure (see Table 11). These experiences still remain relevant, however, because they presented opportunities for professionals to recognise the abuse and opportunities for the young person to disclose. Five young people reported that social services had been historically involved with their families, usually in relation to ongoing issues of domestic violence. Three reported that these professionals were involved because of an adoption process, supervision visits after parental divorce and to support the needs of a disabled sibling. Five young people reported that they had been in care when they were younger. Eleven reported that social services carried out assessments in the home related to neglect or due to the young person's own mental health problems. Among the total 34, there were 20 young people that reported that social services became involved once they disclosed abuse to the police. These have been considered “formal” and “linked” disclosures, although none of the 20 young people actively reached out to social services professionals in the process of disclosure.

Where social services were involved post-disclosure, young people recalled different aspects of their involvement, including: assessments, interviews, referrals, counselling (or facilitating counselling), and “talking through the process” of investigation. One young person could not remember what social services did but only remembers them visiting the house.

#### Assumptions about the role of social services

Before examining experiences with social services, it is worth noting that seven young people (a mix of those who reported social services involvement and those who reported no social services involvement) reported that, as children, they had a general anxiety about and distrust of social services and how social workers would respond following a disclosure. Some made the assumption, for example, that they would be put into care or be taken out of the family. The following extract highlights this anxiety; it is by a young woman who was physically abused by

Table 11: Young people's involvement with social services

Young people's involvement with social services	
Total involved with social services at some point	34 (57%)
Historic involvement (usually domestic violence related)	5 (8%)
Adoption/supervision orders/support for disabled sibling	3 (5%)
Social worker carried out assessment on child	11 (18%)
In care when younger	5 (8%)
Involvement after disclosure	20 (33%)

her grandmother's partner, and she also witnessed significant domestic violence between them. Here, she is referring to a family friend who knew what was going on and told her that she was going to phone social services:

I think just 'cause I was scared 'cause like so many people try so hard like to keep it quiet then you just get scared by what will happen if you don't. And I didn't like, I didn't want bad things to happen if she had done (called them) and it kind of panicked me more what would happen, than like the situation that it was at the time.

Another young person held similar views of social services when she was younger, but acknowledged that, as an adult, she would not have this suspicion of social care and recognises now that it would have been a good idea to have contacted them at the time. Notwithstanding this change of view, this theme shows how the role of social workers continues to have a particular – and negative – reputation with some children, presenting a key barrier for trusting these professionals. This may also explain more generally why none of these young people decided actively to turn to social services in the first instance of disclosure.

### Learning from missed opportunities for intervention

In the accounts of 12 young people who did not disclose to social services there are descriptions of social services involvement where social workers missed opportunities to identify ongoing abuse. In all of these cases, social workers were involved with the families for a range of issues such as described above, including the young person's struggles with depression or self-harm. Overall, these young people felt that the social workers concerned failed to get to the root of the problem. Four young people described how social workers, sometimes working jointly with other professionals, only talked to their parents and not to them; or they talked to the young people with one or both parents present. Young people felt that they did not have the opportunity to speak freely and safely about their abuse, particularly given that parents were often the perpetrators of the abuse. Several young people stated without doubt that this was the reason they did not disclose abuse to those social workers involved.

Five young people reported that the social workers did not ask the "right" questions. One young person was assessed from the point at which the social worker became involved for parental domestic violence. Because of this, the social worker did not uncover sexual abuse that had been occurring for many years before. The young person did not disclose because she was not asked about any previous experiences,

and she felt as if the social worker was uninterested in her. Other young people were seeing social workers because of their own mental health struggles and they believe that these professionals failed to understand what underpinned their difficulties. One young person reported that she believes her injuries from her abuse were not picked up on because her social worker had problems with their sight. She acknowledged that it was not the fault of the social worker for failing to notice, but it does highlight the importance of joint working in these cases in order to maximise opportunities for someone to notice both emotional needs and physical injuries.

Two young people reported that social workers acted insensitively during their visits which meant that they failed to develop trust for these professionals. One young woman, whose parents both had mental health problems, experienced physical abuse by her father and witnessed domestic violence between her parents. She also had a disabled sibling. As a result, this young woman often cared for her mother and her sibling and kept the house running by doing the cooking and washing, while trying to keep up with her homework. She felt that the social worker lacked sensitivity to her responsibilities and would get "annoyed" when the young woman would not take the time to sit down and talk to her.

#### The importance of social care professionals talking to children and young people

This young woman was physically and emotionally abused by her mother, as were her siblings and father. Social workers became involved because of reports made by her father, which her mother would deny.

They (social workers) never spoke to me or my siblings ... But they would just come and, and because my dad was at work, they would speak to my mum, who would put on a very good act, everything was absolutely fine, my children are fine ... Erm and then my dad would probably be accused of lying at that point, because clearly mum is fine. My dad used to talk to us and say, 'If anyone asked you anything would you tell them the truth?' and we always said 'Absolutely yes' but then we were never asked ...

### Communicating with children and young people

There were some clear messages about communication from those young people who reported experiences of social services. It is not possible to know whether given the chance, the

young people would indeed have disclosed abuse if better communication had been achieved. However, their accounts provide some insight into how communication might be improved to maximise social workers' ability to identify abuse and also maximise children and young peoples' opportunities to tell them what is going on. The following messages emerged from the young people's accounts.

- Young people want social workers to show an active interest in them, even if professionals are there for other reasons and do not know about the abuse the child is experiencing or has experienced.
- Young people do not want to be seen as "troubled"; some young people believed that if social workers had taken the time to understand the nature of their problems, the abuse might have been identified.
- Young people want social workers to be impartial when investigating or assessing problems in the home; this involves ensuring that children and young people are spoken to in a safe environment separate from parents.
- Young people want social workers to "ask the right questions"; young people might have disclosed abuse if social workers had taken more time to get to know them, assessed their whole environment rather than the present issue for which they are involved, and asked them directly about abuse.

### **The importance of talking to children and young people on their own**

A young woman with Asperger's syndrome was emotionally and physically neglected and abused by both parents. Her mother had bipolar disorder and both parents drank. Social services became involved with the family because of the young woman's Asperger's but made assumptions about the family relationships:

Quite a lot of the time, like they (social workers) asked me kind of stuff in front of my parents, so ... Bit silly, they assumed that my parents were like really good parents.

# Chapter 4: Missed opportunities for intervention

## Key insights

- Providing children with better knowledge about boundaries, their rights to protection and safety, and information about where they can turn for help are important steps in increasing opportunities for children to seek help.
- Key opportunities were missed because:
  - family members failed to notice signs such as self-harm, personality changes, or physical injuries
  - family members were aware of abuse but were reluctant to intervene
  - family members tried to intervene informally but were unsuccessful.
- Better awareness and information about where the general public can seek information and advice seems, therefore, an important strategy for increasing opportunities to intervene and stop abuse.
- Missed opportunities to intervene occurred when there was a failure to notice signs and signals, or a misinterpretation of these signs, such as labelling the young person as “troublesome”.
- Several attempts to disclose abuse to professionals were handled poorly and resulted in retracted disclosures or investigations which were dropped, presenting missed opportunities for protecting young people.

This chapter consolidates the learning from all recipients of disclosure, both informal and formal. The interviews provided the opportunity to explore with young people the points in their lives when they believed that someone could have intervened or picked up signs that they were being abused. An ecological framework has been used to structure this section to help identify potential points of intervention at a range of levels (Figure 3). The young people identified many opportunities for intervention that could have occurred across professional groups, including social services, the police and teachers. They provided less information about missed opportunities within their families, but this is likely to be because of the significant amount of abuse and violence that was occurring within their homes.

Family members were perpetrators themselves, being abused themselves, or family violence was normalised and therefore the young people saw few opportunities for their families to have done something to recognise and stop the abuse.

## 4.1 Individual child

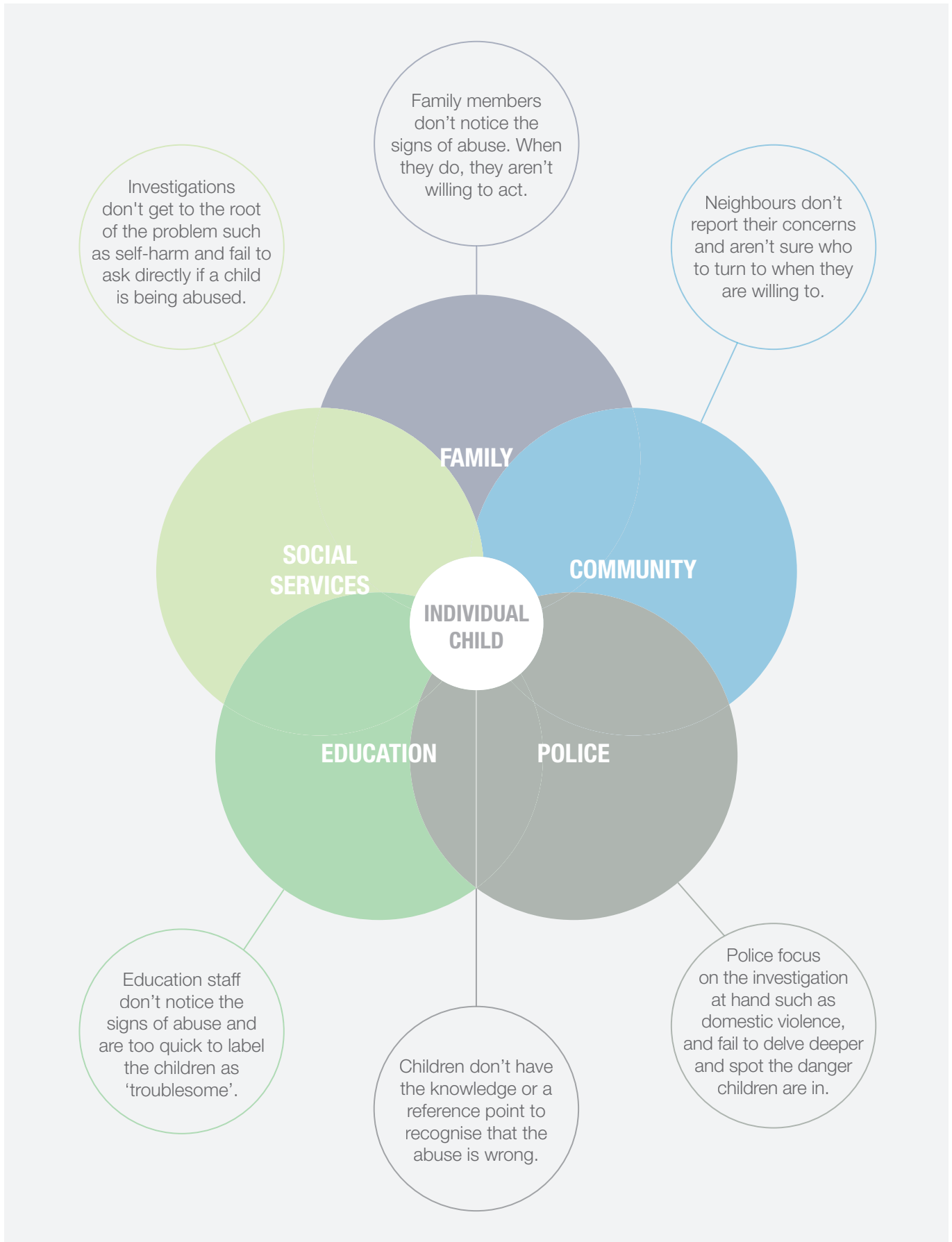
Developmental constraints in the individual child or young person – such as cognitive and verbal functions – hindered direct verbal disclosures. Missed opportunities to spot abuse arise when professionals fail to provide or offer children and young people the knowledge about their rights to protection and safety, about boundaries in relationships, and information on where to turn for help. Doing so is crucial for increasing the opportunities for children and young people to seek help. Young people described lacking the vocabulary to talk about abuse. Some simply lacked a reference point to identify that their abuse was not commonplace or “normal”. Others reported that they instinctively “knew” something was not right, but lacked confidence to broach the subject with others. The young person’s need for knowledge themselves was by far the strongest theme that emerged at the level of the individual child. More than half of the young people reported one or more of the following areas where they feel they lacked information:

- knowledge about abuse, and whether it is “normal” within other families
- knowledge about a safe and confidential/anonymous place they could turn to for help in schools
- knowledge about other services such as ChildLine or local services where they could get help.

Providing children with better knowledge about boundaries, their rights to protection and safety and information about where they can turn for help are important steps in increasing opportunities for children to seek help. Better information and knowledge may not be enough for some children to feel able to disclose. Barriers to disclosure overlap and there may be other reasons why a child may not tell. Combined with other opportunities for intervention – for example, adults paying attention and providing a safe place to talk – children may disclose abuse earlier.



## Why doesn't abuse stop sooner?



## 4.2 Family environment

Young people's families were described as unsupportive and unprotective, characterised by significant levels of family adversity and violence, and multiple forms of abuse perpetrated by multiple family members. In numerous cases, the presence of intimate partner violence between parents also contributed to non-disclosure, or to disclosures that went ignored. Violence and abuse in some accounts may have been "normalised" within the wider family dynamics, as young people reported that extended family members often knew that there was physical and emotional violence occurring. Young people felt isolated, alone and unsafe. It is therefore difficult to find missed opportunities for intervention by family members within these circumstances.

However, young people believed that some extended family members who were not perpetrating abuse were aware of or at least suspected abuse but did nothing to intervene or did not do enough to help protect them. Some of the young people described family circumstances that did not foster open communication in the household. This dissuaded some from disclosing abuse because they did not feel they could talk about it. Key opportunities were missed because:

- family members failed to notice signs such as self-harm, personality changes, or physical injuries
- family members were aware of abuse but were reluctant to intervene
- family members tried to intervene informally but were unsuccessful
- family environments did not encourage open communication.

Raising awareness of signs and signals of abuse and making it clearer where they themselves can get advice may help extended family members to confirm their worries.

## 4.3 Community/ neighbourhood

Some young people talked about missed opportunities for intervention at the community level. Some believed that neighbours and family friends had picked up on signs that something was not right within the family but failed to follow up or report their concerns. Young people's perceptions were based on information they received after the abuse had come to light. After her disclosure, one young person found out during the trial that the perpetrator had abused another child in the neighbourhood but that the child's parents had not formally reported it to the police. This suggests that community members living close to

children may have suspicions or may have seen things that worried them. It is not possible to know their reasons for failing to get involved because they were not a part of this research, but it suggests that at least some people in the community may have concerns or knowledge that could be important for identifying abuse. Better awareness and information about where the general public can seek information and advice seems, therefore, an important strategy for increasing opportunities to intervene and stop abuse.

## 4.4 Agency/organisational level

Young people described a range of ways in which professionals missed opportunities to intervene. These missed opportunities relate to:

1. Failure to notice signs of abuse or self-harm
2. Failure to ask children and young people directly about abuse
3. A poorly handled process of responding to abuse disclosures.

### 4.4.1 Noticing signs and signals of abuse or self-harm

Failure to notice signs and signals, or misinterpretation of these signs, was most commonly attributed to teachers and other education staff. Young people believed that because they saw these professionals on a daily basis, more could have been done to recognise and intervene. Signs were often missed, although some young people did acknowledge that they were very good at hiding bruises and injuries from self-harm, which may explain why teachers did not notice. Other young people had made no attempts to hide these sorts of injuries and often said that teachers misinterpreted these signs and labelled the children or young people as merely "troublesome". Signs that were missed or misinterpreted include:

- behavioural signs such as acting out in class, missing school frequently, sexually inappropriate behaviour
- self-harm such as cutting on the legs and arms
- eating disorders or weight issues
- bruises and cuts from physical abuse
- emotional signs which were often described as *changes* from previous emotional states: for example, mood swings, increased aggression or anger, becoming withdrawn, often tearful in school, onset of depression
- signs of neglect such as holes in clothing or poor hygiene

- increasingly poor schoolwork or attention in class
  - being bullied
  - parents never involved, for example, never picking up child from school or meeting with teachers.

#### 4.4.2 Failure to ask children directly about abuse

Young people felt that there were missed opportunities to identify abuse because professionals – mainly social workers and teachers – did not ask them directly if something was wrong. Many young people wished they *had* been asked directly about abuse. Young people sometimes felt that teachers recognised something was wrong but were reluctant to become involved and never approached them directly. Sometimes social workers were involved in the family because young people were struggling with depression, self-harm or suicidal ideation, but they were never asked – or were not asked sensitively – about what was underlying these issues. Often professionals of all kinds – police, social workers, teachers and health care workers – were seen to view the young people as the issue, causing problems for their families.

#### 4.4.3 Poorly handled investigations of disclosures

Several attempts to disclose abuse to professionals were handled poorly and resulted in retracted disclosures or investigations which were dropped, presenting missed opportunities for protecting young people.

#### Education professionals

Sometimes, teachers went directly to the parents to discuss a disclosure. In these instances, at least one parent was a perpetrator of abuse; or the mother was experiencing domestic violence and wished to protect her husband/partner. Young people were frustrated because they knew that their parents could appear to be protective and supportive to professionals serving to allay the anxieties of the teacher and averting further follow-up. There was evidence that this kind of action could lead to retracted disclosures.

#### The police and social services

A very specific context emerged in cases where the young people had disclosed abuse to a teacher. Sometimes, teachers would appropriately report the information to the police who then became involved, along with social services professionals. In several accounts, however, the parents (at least one of whom was a perpetrator of abuse) were invited to be in the same room as the child during interviews. This strategy often led to retracted disclosures and cases were dropped.

This lack of a safe place for interviewing the young person also occurred in a few cases where social services were visiting the family home. Discussions involved the parents and children in the same room together with no opportunity for the child to talk on their own. These also resulted in retracted disclosures and further abuse occurring.

#### Investigations of other abuse

The police and social services were involved in a number of young people's families for a range of reasons, such as domestic violence or neglect. Some young people felt that this was an ideal opportunity for these professionals to identify sexual abuse or other abuse directed towards them. However, they were disappointed that these professionals seemed only interested in the specific issue they were investigating and were uninterested in them (the young people). This view developed because these professionals were primarily talking to one or both parents, and not to the young person. Also, some young people felt that assessments were not exhaustive, generally gathering information on present circumstances and failing to gather clear information about the past.

# Chapter 5: The disclosure journey

## Key insights

- Those disclosures that were broadly described as positive, for only 10 per cent of the young people, had three key features, which were evident in both informal and formal disclosures. These were:
  - that the recipient of disclosure believed the young person
  - that the recipient of disclosure took some form of action in response
  - the young person received some form of emotional support to help them through the process.

It is not a simple task to summarise the outcomes of disclosure for all of the young people in this sample because their experiences were so varied and unique. Young people faced multiple challenges to disclosure and made decisions to disclose for different reasons. What they wanted from disclosures differed as did the people whom they chose to tell. The experience of disclosing must also be set in the context of young people's feelings and emotions at the time of abuse. All were coping with significant abuse, sometimes multiple forms of abuse, most occurring within the family – and they had been coping with it for many years on their own. Young people were struggling emotionally which manifested in some as self-harm, depression, suicidal ideation or substance use. Some young people were acting out their anger and emotional frustrations, simultaneously being labelled as “troublesome”. Others were withdrawn and isolated. Numerous young people reported feeling ashamed, guilty and embarrassed by what they had experienced. Some were anxious that they would not be believed. All of these emotions and behaviours framed the starting point for disclosure, which meant that it was always going to be a difficult process for the young people involved.

Recognising these difficulties, disclosure “journeys” for 48 young people have been broadly summarised by assessing their overall subjective feelings about their initial disclosures and assessing their feelings about any linked disclosures. Both initial and linked disclosures were separately characterised by young people's overall feelings of whether they got what *they* needed from the disclosures. Using this personal dimension as a marker, overall journeys were characterised as generally “positive”, generally “negative” or “mixed”.

## 5.1 Broadly positive disclosure journeys

Those disclosures that were broadly described as positive had three key features, which were evident in both informal and formal disclosures. These were:

1. that the recipient of disclosure believed the young person
2. that the recipient of disclosure took some form of action in response
3. the young person received some form of emotional support to help them through the process.

Five young people (10 per cent) held broadly positive attitudes about their overall disclosure experiences. Two of these made both initial and linked disclosures; three made initial disclosures but no linked disclosures. Initial disclosures were all made to friends (two were made to boyfriends/girlfriends) and all five felt that they received the emotional support they needed. Emotional support generally referred to: being believed; being able to talk about their abuse with someone they trusted; and support in making further formal disclosures by the confidant being in the same room when the disclosure occurred or providing moral support. Linked disclosures to other family members, specifically mothers, were described as positive for similar reasons. Mothers were said to have believed the young person, talked to them about what they went through and supported them through formal reporting. Two of the young people who made no linked disclosures were clear that they did not want their initial disclosures to be followed up, and the people that they told respected their wishes. Only one was still living at home with the perpetrator of physical and emotional abuse (his mother) at the time. The third young person was safe from the perpetrator at the time and was only seeking emotional support.

Linked disclosures to the police and the courts in this group were also generally good. All of the perpetrators were arrested, one has been jailed and the other two were awaiting trial at the time of interview. Engagement with the criminal justice system was broadly straightforward. All gave video testimony and felt they were treated well by the professionals involved. None felt uninformed, and none reported poor communication. One received criminal injury compensation. All had emotional support from someone in the family during the process.



## 5.2 Mixed experiences of disclosure

The disclosure experiences of 24 young people (50 per cent) can be described as 'mixed' because they reported some satisfaction with certain features of the disclosures but some dissatisfaction with other aspects. For some young people initial disclosures were perceived as "good", but linked disclosures were unpleasant. For other young people, initial disclosures did not always turn out the way they had hoped, but linked disclosures were more straightforward. Sometimes certain aspects of the initial disclosures were positive, but may have been missing a key component. For example, several young people felt that although protective action had been taken, they did not receive any emotional support at the time which they feel they needed. Alternately, linked disclosures were positive in some ways – young people were broadly happy with the interview process and the way they were treated – but the outcome in court was unsatisfactory. Some of the features of these disclosures are described in the following brief sections.

### Young people had good experiences with initial disclosures, but found their linked disclosures problematic in some way (n=9)

As in the previous section, young people who felt that their initial disclosures were handled well were those who were believed immediately and had some sort of support from at least one friend and/or family member. However, these young people cited problems with follow-on disclosures, many of which have been described in previous sections of the report including: lack of individual support during the court process; professionals not listening to what the participant wanted; low levels of support from social care; lack of adequate follow-up by police and social care professionals; poor handling of linked disclosures, causing retraction; and poor reactions by family members to disclosures. Two young people in this group made no linked disclosures. One young man was involved with the police because his mother (who was also the perpetrator of physical abuse) reported *him* to the police for assault after he tried to defend himself against her.

The police treated him as the perpetrator of abuse and he was required to attend an anger management course. He did not believe that the police would accept his version of events and therefore did not disclose. The other young person did not disclose because she was worried that she would not be believed by the police and/or the court system.

### Young people had poor or mixed experiences with initial disclosures, but linked disclosures were broadly good (n=2)

One young woman in this category disclosed sexual abuse by a family friend to her mother, but her mother was also a perpetrator of physical and emotional abuse. Although she took protective action by calling the police, her mother provided little emotional support and the physical and emotional abuse did not subside. The linked disclosure to the police was, however, satisfactory and the perpetrator was arrested and jailed.

The other young woman in this category disclosed to her family, whom she described as "close-knit". She had been anxious because the perpetrator was her mother's brother. Her initial disclosure to her parents and sister was heard and believed, but her parents did not take formal protective action immediately, which she would have liked. Instead, they kept the perpetrator away from her, believing they could protect her. It was only after her sister disclosed additional abuse that they knew they had to report the perpetrator to the police. The follow-on disclosures to professionals were satisfactory and the perpetrator was jailed and placed on the sex offender register.

### Young people had mixed experiences with both initial and linked disclosures (n=13)

A significant proportion of young people had variable experiences all the way through their disclosure journeys. Mixed views on initial disclosures were characterised by: 1) having at least one supportive person even if others were not; or 2) the person who received the disclosure taking protective action but not providing emotional support; or 3) initial disclosures going unheard but later disclosures being acknowledged and acted upon.

Mixed experiences with linked disclosures were characterised by an overall process that included the arrest of the perpetrator, investigations and some level of support from social care or counsellors. However, some of these were still seen as problematic by some of the young people. Some felt they did not receive adequate support during the formal process of reporting and going to court, for example. Others felt uninformed and treated as children. Others were unhappy with the sentencing of the perpetrator or because the perpetrator had not been jailed.

## 5.3 Broadly negative disclosure journeys

Forty per cent of the young people (n=19), unfortunately, had poor experiences across the entire disclosure journey. Eight of these young people had no linked disclosures because their abuse was never formally reported to the police or social services. Young people in this group often reported feeling isolated and alone. In most cases, both parents were perpetrating abuse or one was the abuser and the other had some knowledge of the abuse but enabled, facilitated or ignored it. There was also evidence of parental mental health and substance abuse problems in some of these accounts. Most had few sources of support in their extended family and felt isolated generally from others. Responses to initial disclosures were usually poor and include the following features: disclosures went unheard, or were ignored; disclosures were poorly handled by professionals; the young people were accused of lying or attention-seeking; the recipient of disclosures was also being abused and could not help.

Follow-on linked disclosures often were unsatisfactory for this group of young people who felt that professionals did not do enough; that professionals treated them as children; that they did not like the way professionals communicated with them; that they were uninformed about what would happen next; and that some professionals merely believed the young person's own problems were the issue. Sometimes cases were dropped and disclosures were not properly followed up. Many young people in this group retain particularly negative views of professionals because of their experiences, which highlights the importance of handling disclosures sensitively and responding to children's needs and anxieties.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

This report has described the experiences of help-seeking through disclosure of 60 young men and women who experienced abuse and violence in childhood and adolescence. These young people reported high levels of family and community violence, many reporting different and overlapping forms, making them very different from the general population in the United Kingdom. Many of the young people who disclosed abuse did so within the last 10 years, making the findings of this report highly relevant to contemporary practice. The conclusions here can be framed around three key themes:

1. information
2. communication
3. being noticed, asked and heard.

## Information

Woven throughout this report is the theme of needing information. Young people need information about healthy relationships at an early age. This is not only to allow young people to develop their own healthy relationships, but also to enable them to contextualise and gauge whether something that is happening to them is abuse. Many of the young people turned to their friends for help and support, but these friends also need to know how best to provide that support.

The experiences of disclosure to professionals highlighted the importance young people placed on being informed. Both negative and positive experiences of disclosure emphasised the importance of informing children and young people about what will happen to their disclosures and how they will be protected. Young people said they were worried about what would happen next and that they felt overwhelmed after disclosure. Some young people felt that professionals had not informed them well, leaving them frightened and anxious about the investigative process.

## Communication

The experiences of disclosure to professionals provided many examples of poor communication throughout the report, but examples of positive communication were also identified. Professionals need to remember that they should use developmentally age-appropriate language with children and young people. Disclosing abuse can raise feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt, so it is not surprising that young people wanted to be spoken to directly, but sensitively about the abuse. Professionals need to consider not only “how” they

communicate, but “where” and “with whom”. Ensuring that young people have a safe and private location to speak to a professional is paramount. Professionals should take care to determine if parents and carers may be perpetrators of abuse or colluding with perpetrators before inviting them to sit in on interviews with young people.

## Being noticed, asked and heard

This theme was a consistent thread throughout the findings. Some young people emphasised, for example, that they delayed their disclosures – or did not disclose – because no one asked them or no one noticed they were struggling. It is not surprising that having someone notice and ask was a key catalyst for disclosure for some young people – although not all children and young people may be ready to disclose, even if someone asks them. There was evidence that even if young people were not ready to disclose fully about the abuse, being asked about it provided them with a pathway to seek help later when they were ready.

Being noticed was also highlighted as important when considering specific experiences with friends and with key professionals. Young people appreciated it when friends noticed that they were unhappy or were self-harming, even if they were unable to disclose their abuse to them. Both positive and negative accounts of interactions with teachers, police and social workers emphasised that young people wanted to be noticed. Police and social care professionals who were involved with families for other reasons were often perceived as interested only in the matter at hand and not in the wider experiences of the young person. Where the police or social care professionals were involved because of the young person’s own behaviours or struggles, the young person wanted the professionals to try to understand what was really underlying their troubles and not be seen as merely troublesome or troubled.

Finally, young people noted that there were many missed opportunities for intervention because signs and disclosures went unrecognised or were ignored. Parents and other close family members whom young people believe knew about the abuse or suspected it did not act; neighbours or other community members later admitted that they had suspicions but never acted on them; and young people’s experiences with professionals across all agencies indicated that they felt there was more that could have been done had these professionals asked the right questions or assessed them effectively.

## Summary

This research has highlighted the need for greater awareness about the signs of abuse, that children do disclose but we don't hear those disclosures. The research has emphasised the need for professionals to ask young people about abuse in a direct and developmentally appropriate manner, while ensuring they are safely able to disclose. Children and young people need to be provided with better knowledge about boundaries, their rights to protection and safety, and healthy relationships, and information about where and how to seek help. The research has also highlighted the important role of other adults in noticing the signs of abuse and hearing disclosures in all of their forms.



# Appendix A – Methods

## Links with the child maltreatment study

The current study on help-seeking was linked, and ran parallel to, another NSPCC study on child maltreatment in the United Kingdom. In 2000 the NSPCC published research on the prevalence of child maltreatment in the United Kingdom based on a household survey of 2,869 young adults' memories of childhood abuse. In 2009, the NSPCC carried out a second UK-wide study in order to provide an updated picture of child maltreatment. A random probability sample of parents, young people and young adults in the United Kingdom were interviewed about experiences of child abuse and neglect. The sample consisted of: 2,160 parents or guardians of children aged under 11 years; 2,275 young people aged 11 to 17 years with additional information from their parents or guardians and 1,761 young adults aged 18 to 24 years.

The child maltreatment study found that some forms of maltreatment reported by young adults aged 18 to 24 were lower in 2009 than in 1998–1999. However there is still a substantial minority of children and young people who are severely maltreated and experiencing abuse at home, in school and in the community, from adults and from peers. The study revealed that children and young people who were maltreated by a parent or guardian were also more likely to experience other types of abuse from other perpetrators. The current study collected data during the latter stages of the child maltreatment study, which provided a perfect opportunity to follow up with some of the original study participants; to harmonise some aspects of data collection; and to place the qualitative sample in a national context.<sup>50</sup>

## The study

The study used a mixed method approach to collect data retrospectively from 60 young adults aged 18 to 24 (at the time of interviews in 2009–10). Quantitative data was collected through the NSPCC child maltreatment questionnaire<sup>51</sup> which was completed by the participating young people using computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI). Qualitative data was collected via in-depth interviews following completion of the child maltreatment study questionnaire.

## Child maltreatment participants

The child maltreatment study included a question asking participants' permission to be re-contacted to take part in further research, allowing the researchers to follow up with some participants identified in that larger study. Participants who experienced sexual, physical, emotional abuse and/or neglect, or who witnessed family violence were chosen from the child maltreatment study to contact. Only 13 could be re-contacted given the time lapse (around one year) between the child maltreatment study and current study data collection. All 13 consented to take part in the follow-up research.

## Self-select participants

The remaining 47 young people were not part of the child maltreatment study, and were instead recruited to boost the numbers for this follow-up research. They are a convenience sample, recruited from the NSPCC website, NSPCC Facebook page, counselling or other therapeutic services and universities. Flyers were developed inviting young adults to take part if they:

were aged between 18 to 24 (to match the age of the 13 young people recruited from the child maltreatment study); and

experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse or witnessed domestic/family violence.

Those who were interested in taking part contacted a member of the research team who described the study and what was involved, and set up an interview.

## Data collection

The 13 child maltreatment study participants had already filled out the questionnaire, and therefore the research team only carried out two-hour follow-up interviews with this group. The self-select group participated in a two-part study: 1) completion of the questionnaire (one hour); and 2) follow-up interviews (two hours). Both groups were provided with a participant information sheet prior to the appointments. Consent was taken verbally and in written form on the day of the meeting before the interview commenced. The majority of data collection with the self-select participants occurred during the same visit, however on three occasions, a researcher

50 Full details of the methodology and findings from Radford *et al.*'s (2011) study can be found on the NSPCC website at [www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/child\\_abuse\\_neglect\\_research\\_wda84173.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/findings/child_abuse_neglect_research_wda84173.html).

51 See Radford *et al.* (2011) for detail.

had to re-organise an additional visit. Participants were given £30 high street vouchers as a thank you for taking part.

During the in-depth interviews, the interviewers focused on information that was not collected in the questionnaire in order to avoid duplication and participant fatigue during data collection. Therefore some quantitative data has also been utilised where relevant.

## Ethics

The interviews explored sensitive and personal experiences of abuse in childhood. For this reason, both the physical and emotional safety of participants was paramount. All researchers carrying out interviews were knowledgeable about child safety and welfare and the principle investigators had extensive experience of carrying out sensitive interviews in related areas of work. Prior to the study, the research team undertook training in minimising harm in research, delivered by an expert consultant in domestic and sexual violence and who was also a psychologist with many years of clinical experience. Because many of the interviews were likely to take place at participants' homes where children may be present, all researchers were required to have enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks. The research was granted ethical approval by the NSPCC Child Protection Research Ethics Committee.

Ethical guidelines were developed in respect of informed consent, confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study. These were developed in consultation with a group of young adults similar in characteristics to the intended study sample and recruited from a sexual abuse counselling service in the Greater London area. Guidelines on responding to information that suggests a child may be at risk adhered to NSPCC recommendations and all the researchers had previously taken NSPCC child protection training. All participants were provided with an information leaflet which included an explanation of the research confidentiality policy (including researcher responsibilities in cases where a participant discloses information that may indicate that a child is at risk of harm). Topic areas

for discussion in the interviews were included in the leaflet. Examples of some of the most sensitive questions that would be asked were also included to minimise participant surprise and discomfort during the interviews. A list of local and national support organisations was available to provide to participants if needed or requested. Approximately one week after the interview, the attending researcher re-contacted the participant to thank them for taking part and to ask the participant how they experienced the research. Finally, a trained counsellor was employed to provide support to participants after the study if they requested it. Five participants in total accepted support, which involved short-term telephone discussions (eg, once a week for up to four weeks).

## Interview sample

Participants were recruited from five sources. The majority were recruited from the NSPCC website, where the study was advertised on an information page for adults abused in childhood. Thirteen people in total were recruited from the child maltreatment study, and the remainder were recruited via an established NSPCC Facebook page, through leaflets distributed to university student unions, and one participant was recruited from an existing contact list within the NSPCC media department.

## Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded with permission from participants. Each recording was fully transcribed and anonymised by assigning each recording and transcription a participant ID. Quantitative analysis on the child maltreatment study data was carried out in a software package – SPSS – designed for analysing survey data. An additional data set was created out of the in-depth interviews to describe disclosures. NVivo8 software was used to manage data and facilitate analysis. A coding frame was developed drawing upon the themes from the interviews, and later refined and built upon after further coding and reading of transcripts. Specific calculations for data presented in the report are outlined in more detail below.

**Table 12: Recruitment sources**

	Males	Females
Participants from child maltreatment study	4	9
Participants recruited from the NSPCC website	3	41
Participants recruited from the NSPCC Facebook page	0	1
Participants recruited from universities	0	1
Participant recruited from NSPCC media contacts	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>53</b>

## Calculation of polyvictimisation

In order to calculate polyvictimisation, all the different victimisation experiences that each participant had experienced in their lifetime using the 39 screener questions in the questionnaire were added. The average number of screener questions answered affirmatively was 19.85 (median of 20). The fewest number to which young people answered “yes” was nine, and the highest number was 31.

Assessing the threshold for polyvictimisation is more difficult, and is not yet an exact science, as there is currently no research consensus on the number of victimisations that makes someone a “polyvictim”. However, some experts recommend classifying the top 10 per cent of maltreatment and victimisation exposures within a national sample as polyvictims.<sup>52</sup> In order to place this study’s sample within the national context, the polyvictimisation threshold identified within the child maltreatment study was used. Polyvictims were identified as those 18 to 24 year olds with 15 or more positive responses to different maltreatment and victimisation types in their lifetime.<sup>53</sup> Applying this threshold to the study sample, a significant majority (n=49, 82 per cent) of the young people reported 15 or more different maltreatment and victimisation experiences.

## Calculating severe contact sexual abuse

Fifty-seven (95 per cent) of the young people reported contact sexual abuse in the questionnaire, which was measured by affirmative answers to any one of following three questions:

1. At any time before you were 18, did a grown-up touch your private parts when they shouldn’t have, or make you touch their private parts or did a grown-up force you to have sex?
2. At any time before you were 18, did anyone try to force you to have sex, that is sexual intercourse of any kind even if it didn’t happen?
3. At any time before you were 18, did you do sexual things with anyone 18 or older, even things you wanted? [*Young people’s affirmative responses were removed unless the reported event occurred when they were aged 15 or younger*]

A measure of severe contact sexual abuse was also calculated. Severe contact sexual abuse is where the young person said that there were forced actual or attempted assaults; and where any sexual acts occurred under the age of 18 and were perpetrated by a parent or guardian, an adult sibling or an adult in a position of trust; if under the age of 16 and perpetrated by an adult relative; or if under the age of 13 and perpetrated by any adult.<sup>54</sup> Forty-seven (78 per cent) of the young people fit this measure of severe contact sexual abuse.<sup>55</sup> Three young people (one male, two females) reported severe contact sexual abuse in the questionnaire but did not discuss these experiences in the interviews, therefore they are excluded from the interview counts in Table 2, *Comparison of abuse and victimisation experiences reported in the questionnaire and the in-depth interviews*, and their accounts do not contribute to the analysis of sexual abuse.

## Calculating who disclosed during childhood

Interviews were examined to identify extracts related to disclosure.<sup>56</sup> These extracts were used to assess the proportion of the sample disclosing abuse. A timeline was created for each young person which plotted the period of their abuse and the point(s) at which they reported that they told – or attempted to tell – someone. It should be noted that age/period of disclosure are broad estimations provided by young people. Table 4, *Time when first disclosures occurred (interview data)*, summarises the disclosures for both groups.

## Calculating latency (time delay) to disclosure

### *Young people who experienced sexual abuse (n=44)*

The average age that sexual abuse began was 7.32 years, although this ranges from infancy (under the age of one) to 11 years old. The average age when sexual abuse stopped was 12.5 years, but this also ranges from age seven to 17.<sup>57</sup> The average number of years between the start of abuse and the point at which participants tried to tell someone about it was 7.80 years (with a median of seven years),

52 Finklehor, D., Turner, H., Hamby, S. and Ormrod, R. (2011). ‘Poly-victimisation: Children’s exposure to multiple types of violence, crime and abuse’, *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*. US Department of Justice; Office of Justice Programs. [www.ojp.usdoj.gov](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov)

53 See Radford *et al.* (2011).

54 See Radford *et al.* (2011).

55 Ten young people who reported broad exposure to sexual abuse are not included in the category of severe contact sexual abuse because they did not fit the criteria outlined in the paragraph above. For example, a young person may have reported that someone hurt their feelings by saying or writing something sexual about them.

56 Disclosure rates from the CMS questionnaire for most forms of abuse have not been calculated; the survey design is complex, and not all the young people are asked for each type of violence or abuse whether they told someone about it. For this publication, only disclosure rates for sexual abuse were calculated from the CMS questionnaire. A broader analysis of disclosure rates on other forms of abuse and violence are likely to be explored in further publications.

57 Three participants were excluded from this analysis because they could not recall when sexual abuse started.

although this is highly variable ranging between an immediate disclosure (within one week of first abuse – n=1) and 18 years. A simple correlation test was calculated using the age abuse started and the age at first disclosure and identified an inverse relationship that was significant (at  $p < .05$ ). The test showed that the younger the child or young person was when abuse started, the greater the number of years that passed before they disclosed abuse. Young people were also compared on perpetrator of abuse (family member by non-family member) and polyvictimisation status (polyvictim by non-polyvictim) using a one-way ANOVA and, while some differences in average number of years were identified, these were not significant.

### *Young people who experienced other forms of abuse (n=16)*

Latency to disclosure was not possible to assess accurately for those young people who did not experience sexual abuse. As previously noted, many of these young people did not seek help because other family (immediate and extended) members were already aware of the family violence and did not report this or intervene. Only three young people actively sought help during the period of abuse but two of these could not recall when their abuse started.

### Calculating the characteristics of disclosures

In order to capture a broad characterisation of all disclosures, every excerpt in the in-depth interview transcripts that referred to a disclosure of abuse was captured and subsequently coded into type, mode and purpose. This data was entered into SPSS creating a new database of disclosures, which then allowed for a broad examination of these characteristics. Table 5 provides a breakdown of these disclosures. The remainder of this section draws from this data to describe characteristics, and highlights examples where relevant.

### Limitations of the research

It is important to acknowledge that there were two different recruitment methods employed in the study which may have introduced some bias into the sample. A small number of participants (n=13) were selected from the child maltreatment study to be followed up, while the remainder were recruited via an open, public invitation. Those who had previously taken part in the NSPCC child maltreatment study may have taken part in this follow-up study because they had a previously established connection, and this may well have been key to their participation. A second limitation to the study is the nature of the sample. The research team were most interested in recruiting young adults who had experienced ongoing and systematic abuse and those who had experienced different types of abuse. As will be seen later in the report, the sample broadly fits this target population and therefore they are not representative of young adults in the general population, nor are they representative of all young adults who experienced abuse in childhood. Few young men and few non-White young people took part, also limiting the relevance of the findings. Although the young people in this study did volunteer to discuss their childhood experiences, the researchers do not believe this means these young people represent a sample that is predisposed to disclose their abuse. If this were the case, the latency period for disclosure would be much shorter.



# Appendix B – Broad aims and objectives

The overall aims and objectives of the original research were to explore the range of resources that children may have drawn upon to prevent, resist and/or stop abuse. We also wanted to explore barriers that may have prevented children from resisting or stopping abuse.

Specifically, the objectives included:

1. To explore in depth young abuse survivors' experiences of the circumstances, relationships, contextual factors and interventions that contributed to stopping abuse in childhood.
2. To investigate in context the role of personal strategies and informal support in stopping abuse in childhood.
3. To investigate survivors' perceptions of what interventions in context were appropriate and helpful in stopping abuse to better inform prevention and community safeguarding.

Questions to be addressed

The primary question this research intended to address was "what makes abuse stop?". It was also intended to address a number of related sub-questions, including the following:

- (a) What actions, interventions or changes in behaviour, circumstances or situational contexts do young abuse survivors believe contributed to stopping their victimisation in childhood?
- (b) What strategies do young abuse survivors remember using to help them cope with, mitigate and stop abuse in childhood? How do they adapt and change over time and context?
- (c) When (at what age, stage of their lives, in which circumstances) do young abuse survivors remember having succeeded in stopping abuse? Is there a trend/pattern?
- (d) To what extent do young abuse survivors believe the relationship with the abuser influenced whether or not and how the abuse stopped?
- (e) How do young abuse survivors perceive the role of informal support structures in stopping abuse? How important is peer support or other informal sources of support in helping children and young people to stop abuse? Which types of support have been most useful?
- (f) What role do family context and relationships play in buffering or contributing to abusive situations? How do family dynamics interact and intersect with children's strategies to stop abuse?
- (g) What role do socio-cultural factors play in mediating children's ability to stop abuse and be and feel safe? What are the most salient factors and how do these processes interact?
- (h) Is there a gendered difference in the experience or ability to stop the abuse?
- (i) Do young abuse survivors consider safeguarding and child protection services a help or hindrance for stopping the abuse of children and young people? Which services or interventions do young survivors think we need?
- (j) What do young abuse survivors do to protect themselves from re-victimisation in adulthood?





