

# What Is Child Sexual Abuse?



Working to protect children



## About child sexual abuse

All countries agree that sex is an important part of adult relationships, where both people know each other and understand what sex is. But children do not understand, nor are their bodies or emotions ready. Child sexual abuse is when people introduce a child to sexual activity of any kind and the child has no real choice. Sexual abuse is harmful for children in many ways.

Child sexual exploitation is included in this definition. A child is defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as anyone under the age of 18 years.

Child abuse can only happen if a number of things go wrong. When we understand which things are going wrong, we will see ways of preventing abuse in the future.

### To stop child sexual abuse in your area, you need to think about –

- the attitude of your society to child sexual abuse
- the places where it is happening
- the reasons people (called “offenders”) are doing the abuse
- the vulnerabilities of children and the effects of abuse on them
- the actions of other people to make places and children safer and to stop offenders



The World Health Organisation says that child sexual abuse is:

“...the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are - by virtue of their age or stage of development – in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim.”

(WHO 2006)



Other ECSA Toolkit publications which may help you and your organisation



## Different types of sexual abuse

As far as we know, 90% of abused children are abused by someone they know<sup>1</sup>. There are many different relationships that can end up with a child being sexually harmed.

### Abuse can be –

- **abuse in the home, an institution (eg school) or a public place**
- **abuse by**
  - a family member (30%), another trusted person (60%), or a stranger (10%)<sup>1</sup>
  - an adult, a teenager or a child
  - a male or a female
  - one offender or a number of offenders
- **abuse of**
  - a young child or a teenager
  - a boy or a girl
- **pictures of abuse put on the internet**
- **contact or non-contact abuse**

So in thinking how to prevent child sexual abuse in a city, a region or a country, we need to think about these different features from individual cases and the patterns we can see overall.

This document helps explain some of the things we need to find out.

## How old are the children?

**It is helpful to think about the age of the victim. Is the child younger or older than puberty?**

Puberty is the gradual change that takes place as a child's body becomes sexually mature. Different parts of this process may happen between 12 and 15 years old (different for each child). After 15 a child is still not emotionally ready for sex, even if their body is sexually mature, because they do not yet understand the meaning of a sexual relationship.

### The age of the child can help us understand –

- **how to keep that child safe in future**
- **what effects the sexual abuse may have had on him or her**

**Example 1a.** A 4 year old girl is made to touch the penis of her 18 year old babysitter in her own home.

**Example 1b.** A 14 year old girl is touching the penis of her 30 year old music teacher. She believes she is in a mutual relationship.

The sexual acts might be similar and both girls are victims of abuse. To recover from the abuse, they will need different kinds of help because of their different ages. To prevent such abuse from happening would involve different actions with the different individuals and in the different places.

1. US Department of Justice [www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/FactsStatistics](http://www.nsopw.gov/en/Education/FactsStatistics)

## The importance of relationships

**In 30% of cases sexual abuse takes place by a family member.** The child may want the abuse to stop, but often does not want the offender to have to leave the family. The harm experienced by the victim depends on their relationship with the offender, and with others in the family, as well as the seriousness of the abuse itself (when it started, how long it went on, what sexual acts were done, etc). Sexual abuse can be prevented by seeing relationship problems and worrying behaviours early on, and by putting in boundaries and getting support for the family, before abuse happens.

**Example 2.** *A 12 year old boy is regularly masturbated by his alcohol dependant mother who has been touching him sexually since he was 3 years old.*

He has no idea if others in his family know what is happening. How can he work out if it is wrong? Who can tell when he starts to understand that his mother, who he loves, will be in trouble if he discloses? But he wants it to stop.

## Personal qualities of each child

**Example 3.** *An 8 year old girl with a learning disability is regularly sexually abused by an elderly male neighbour.*

He offers to “help mum out” by allowing the girl to look after his pet rabbits. The mother is grateful for the help and the girl loves being with the rabbits. She is distressed by the sexual abuse, but is unable to tell her parents and she wants to see the rabbits.

**When planning both prevention and recovery, the child’s character and personality need to be considered.** If children have additional needs for any reason (physical, intellectual, or emotional difficulties, behavioural problems, etc) they are more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Asylum seekers and refugee children also have additional vulnerabilities.

## Where does abuse happen?

**Abuse occurs in every culture and every sector of society.** We know that poverty silences children and others, it adds to their vulnerability. In some parts of the world we know that abuse mostly happens in the homes of either the child or the offender. In other parts of the world there may be greater risks in public places or in institutions, eg schools, clubs, churches.

## Groups of offenders

**Teenagers, both female and male, are sometimes abused by groups of men acting together.** They use money, drugs, alcohol, affection, attention and the promise of adult freedom to tempt young people – usually vulnerable boys and girls – into sex. This is called child sexual exploitation. Such abuse can be prevented if early signs are recognised and acted on – signs in the behaviour of the young people who are vulnerable, in the offenders and in the places used to meet, engage with or abuse.

**Example 4.** *A 14 year old girl, who lives in a children’s home, regularly meets up with a group of adult males in a local park. They give her and her friends cigarettes and alcohol, and take them for rides in their car. They persuade her to stay out overnight, after her friend has gone home, and come to a “grown up” party. At the party they get her drunk and several men have sex with her.*

When she says she does not want to see them again, the men say they will harm her. She is too scared to say no. What can she say to her carers when she has been breaking all the rules of the children’s home?

## Outside the family

**Example 5.** *A sports teacher at a private school is sexually abusing 12/13 year-old boys while he is supposed to be coaching them to be in the school's cricket team.*

The teacher is liked and respected by everybody. Each boy believes he is the “chosen one” and he puts up with the abuse because he wants a place in the first team. Each victim knows the teacher is respected by the staff and by his own parents. Who will believe the victim if he speaks out? What will the consequences be for him, if he speaks out and nobody believes him?

**Some offenders get access to children through their work in schools, clubs, churches etc.** It is very difficult for a child or young person to disclose the abuse, especially when the person who abused them is liked by their parents or is respected in the community.

There should always be checking procedures that make it difficult for unsuitable adults to get into roles where they are responsible for children and young people. But prevention also involves setting and enforcing appropriate boundaries that assist safe practice.

## The internet and social media

**It is possible for a child to be abused through the internet and social media. Online sexual abuse of children is an international problem.** Adults (sometimes pretending to be children) have conversations with young people online. They persuade the children to have sexual interactions through webcams and sexting. Sometimes they want to meet the children in real life for abuse. Young people are doing similar things with their same-age peers, which is also harmful. Children need to be taught how to keep themselves safe as well as responsible online and in their use of new technologies.

**Example 6.** *A 13 year-old girl likes talking to her friends, and making new friends, on Facebook. On Facebook she pretends to be a bit older than she really is. She has been in contact with Robert, who is 18, for some time. She has her own laptop and webcam in her bedroom. She wants to have a boyfriend, like her friends do. She thinks she and Robert have a lot in common and know each other well. Gradually their online conversation has become sexual. He tells her he loves her and then he exposes himself, masturbating over the web cam. He persuades her to send him naked pictures of herself, eventually including a video of her masturbating. He then disappears.*

She realises that he always kept his face hidden and she wonders if he was really older than 18. She now worries about what he will do with the pictures she sent to him. She doesn't feel she can talk to anyone in her family as they will find out that she has been sending sexual pictures.

## Wider society

We also need to think about the messages that everyone is getting across the whole of society.

- What media messages are being given? Are young girls and boys being sexualised in the media?
- Is sex used in advertising? Are sexual images used to sell products?
- Is adult pornography legal or illegal? Is it kept safely away from children?
- Are there laws which support the rights of women and children?
- Are there customs which silence women and children?
- Are women afraid to speak out, because there could be bad consequences? If so, children will be even more afraid to speak out, especially girls.

Some of these things are hard to change, but to keep children safe we need to find ways of influencing these things for the better.

## Types of abuse

Child sexual abuse can be thought about in different ways. Every instance is unique. Every child needs protecting. By becoming aware of differences but also patterns we can better work out how to prevent abuse happening in the first place. Every city, every area, every country needs to ask, for example,

- What type of victims? Male/female, child/adolescent, vulnerable?
- What type of offences? Contact/non-contact, penetration/non-penetration, with/without violence, etc
- What type of relationships? In/outside the family, what kind of influence/power, what emotions are part of the relationship?
- What type of situations? In the home, work place, social venue, online, etc
- What type of offender? What pattern of offending? Who are the usual victims?

## What can be done to stop child sexual abuse?

When we have understood what kind of sexual abuse problems we have, in our area, we can decide the best way to stop them.

### Some ways are –

- teach parents how to protect their children
- tell children its OK to speak if they are worried
- teach about respectful relationships in schools
- monitor places known to be risky
- teach everyone the warning signs of abuse
- make sure children are supervised by the right people
- give support and therapy to both victims and offenders

## What are the effects of sexual abuse on children?

### At first a child may –

- Have nightmares, or sleep problems.
- Change their personality eg, seem frightened.
- Go quiet or need a lot of attention.
- Regress to younger behaviour, e.g. bedwetting.
- Have a fear of particular places or people.
- Have outburst of anger.
- Change their eating habits.
- Have physical signs, such as, soreness or bruises around genitals, sexually-transmitted diseases.
- Become secretive.
- Act out in inappropriate sexual ways with toys or objects.

These are important signs to look out for in children as they need our help and support, but may not be able to tell us about the abuse. They may also need professional help. Therapeutic work can help child victims deal with the impacts of their abuse and mend (some of) the damage that was done to them. Work can also be done to improve their future safety.

In later life the effects of abuse can continue. Victims or survivors may find it hard to trust people, they may be afraid to get close to anyone, or they may have difficulties with sexual relationships. If they have their own children they may be afraid that someone will harm them. The effects of abuse can last for a lifetime.

## Why do people sexually abuse children?

**There is much we now understand about child sexual abusers, and a resources list later in this site shows where you can do further reading. Even where we don't know why they do it, we can still understand how they do it. And in understanding how, we can begin our thinking about prevention.**

The sexual abuse of children is always wrong. Clear laws against such abuse are important in signalling the disapproval of society to abuse. If properly enforced, they can also have a deterrent effect in stopping some people from abusing in the first place or in stopping offenders from repeating their behaviour.

When planning to prevent abuse, it is helpful to understand the ways that people end up abusing a child. All of us need closeness, company, intimacy, and sharing. When an adult cannot get these needs met in relationships with other adults they may find other ways of getting them met. Some of these people use children to meet their needs.

Often those who offend do not fully understand the reasons for their behaviour, or the damage it does to children. However they do know that their behaviour is wrong and they are often good at hiding their abusive behaviour.

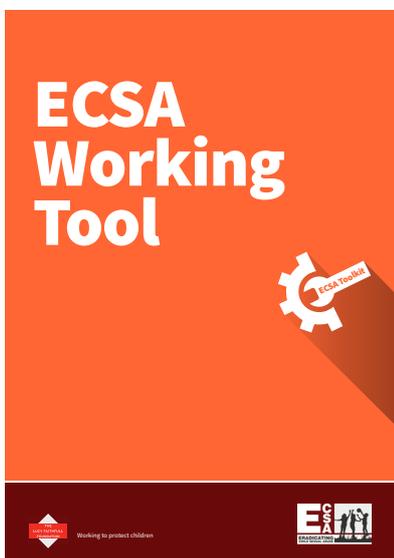
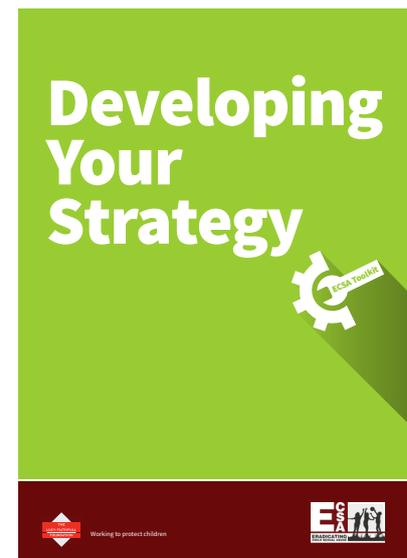
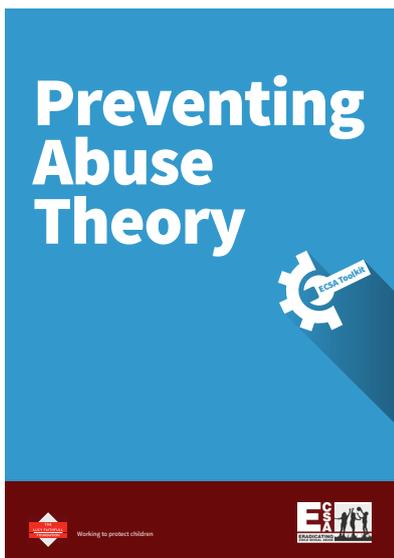
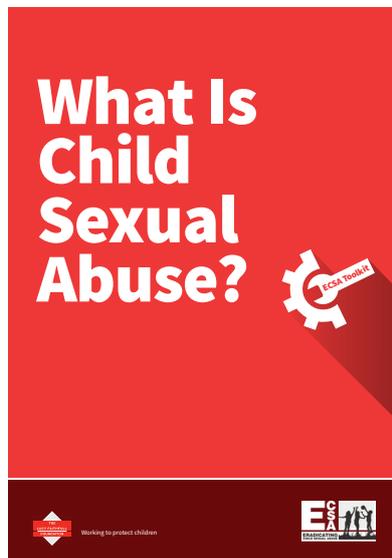
## Who sexually abuses children?

- About 80% of offenders are male.
- Most offenders have victims who are known to them. Offenders who target unknown children can have many victims.
- Between one and two thirds of sexual abuse is done by young people (under 18s). When young people do sexual abuse it is for different reasons to adults. So it is helpful to use the term “young people who have shown sexually harmful behaviour”.
- When you are thinking about an offender some important questions are –
- What risk to children is this person? How will we know when they are no longer a risk?
- Until this person is no longer a risk, what supervision do they need, to protect children?
- What does this person need to understand before they can become safe?
- What are the barriers to this person getting their needs met in safe ways? How can we help?

## Can offenders change?

**There are many programs of work from around the world, to help offenders change.** These help the offender to understand how serious the effects are for the people they abuse. They also teach the offender how to meet his/her needs in safe ways in the future, and how to plan for an offence-free life.

## ECSA Toolkit Publications



All of these publications are available to download via the ECSA website:  
<http://ecsa.lucyfaithfull.org>



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