

Child Sexual Exploitation

A Guide for Parents and Carers Providing Care, Support and Protection to children at risk of or who have been harmed by CSE



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Who We Are




Better Futures is part of Barnardo's. Barnardo's is a children's charity working with families across the UK. We were established over 100 years ago and provide support across many areas of need.

Better Futures is a child sexual abuse response service, providing assessment, therapeutic support, consultation, and training services for children with sexualised histories across Wales. This includes children who have been the victims of sexual abuse; display Harmful Sexual Behaviour; and children who are at risk of or are abused through Child Sexual Exploitation.

We believe that all children and young people should live safe from violence or abuse of any kind, and no child or young person should have to suffer from the impact of it. We will explain more about what child sexual exploitation (CSE) is throughout this guide.

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Who is This Guide For?



This guide is for anyone caring for a child, particularly where they are worried about concerns relating to CSE. Working closely with parents and carers we have included information and advice that parents and carers themselves feel is needed to best help them in spotting the signs, seeking support and in keeping children safe from CSE.

Our aim is to help parents and carers understand the issues surrounding sexual exploitation of children from a parent and carers perspective. To ensure the voices of parents and carers who are experts by experience can share their learning, empowering others to confidently protect children from harm.

Parents and carers told us that looking after a child who is at risk of or who has been harmed by sexual exploitation can be traumatic for all involved. The guide will also include the kinds of support parents and carers told us helped them, their child and the wider family recover from child sexual exploitation.

Here are some useful organisations that provide advice and information about the supports available:

Barnardos
Better Futures
Welsh Government
Cascade, check your thinking
PACE
STOP IT NOW

NSPCC
Centre of Expertise
NWG
Mind
Mindful

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Children's Rights Approaches

All Children and young people have the right to live their life safe and free from harm.

The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC 1989) is an international agreement which details the rights of all children up to 18 years, regardless of their race, religion or abilities. It was brought in because it recognised children and young people need special care and protection.

The agreement guarantees every child the right to grow up healthy, happy and safe, and free from abuse. As will be outlined, CSE is a form of sexual abuse. The UNCRC states children should be

protected from harm and have the right help and support to recover from abuse.

The Article within the agreement that is more relevant to children who experience CSE is:

Article 34: Governments must protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.



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Other Articles that are relevant to CSE are:

Article 19: Governments must do all they can to ensure children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse neglect and bad treatment, by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.

Article 35: Governments must protect children from being abducted, sold or moved illegally to a different place in or outside their country for the purpose of exploitation

Article 39: Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must receive

special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect and social life.

In 2011 Wales became the first country to include the UNCRC within its domestic law. (the laws made within a specific country) This was seen as a pioneering step by Welsh Government and showed dedication to the rights of all children in Wales. Children's rights are already protected in Welsh law under the rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011

A summary of the convention is available via the UNICEF link opposite...



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What is CSE?



Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Like other forms of child sexual abuse children who are sexually exploited rarely tell us it is happening to them at the time. It relies on adults or others involved in the child's life knowing and spotting the signs and then sharing their concerns with police or social services where CSE is known or suspected.

We know CSE can be difficult to spot for children themselves, as well as for parents and carers. Here are some insights from a parent and child that highlights how they understand and experienced CSE.

“I knew something wasn't right, but I just didn't know what. They were still going to school, still helping out at home but things were just different. They started spending more time out of the house, I thought that was normal, they were 15 after all. Looking back there were some signs but I didn't see them at the time. They would stay out late, sometimes overnight and they would get really down sometimes too. They stopped talking to me and eventually stopped listening too. They got in trouble in the community, nothing too serious but the police called to our house. The police said they were out of parental control; I wish I had known that it was because they were in someone else's control instead. By the time I had realised what was happening to them things had got really bad, I could see it, but they still couldn't. That was the hardest bit, we lost our child for a while and things got really bad for us as a family, we are ok now, thankfully.”

Parent of 15-year-old child.

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“Sexual exploitation basically means that somebody may be tricking you to have sex with them or other people. This could include doing sexual things in return for money, drugs, somewhere to stay, gifts or favours. It can be hard to recognise because you often believe you are in a good relationship with the person/people who are abusing you.”

CSE through a child's eyes.

In Wales we have clear guidance about what CSE is and how it should be responded to as outlined below. Parents have told us that knowing this is available would have helped them to understand what was happening for their child at the time.



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Forms of CSE

There are different forms of CSE which of course means we need to understand the different routes into harm as well as different routes out of harm for children. Sometimes children can experience CSE in multiple forms.

Is a form of Sexual Abuse	That can include sex or any form of sexual activity with a child; the production of indecent images and/or any other indecent material involving children.
Involves a Child	It occurs to those up to the age of 18 years old.
Involves some form of exchange	<p>The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something, such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person.</p> <p>There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to, or instead of the child who is exploited.</p> <p>Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchange. Children may feel that they have given consent.</p>

The important thing to remember is no matter what form of CSE the child is exposed to, it is not their fault. CSE is always the fault of the person causing the harm. Just like adults, children can not consent to their own abuse, even when they may not fully recognise it is happening.

Children need adults to know what the signs and indicators are and to take action to protect them when they have concerns. If you are a parent of a child reading this guide, you are taking a big step towards keeping them safe.

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Peer Abuse and Exploitation



We know that CSE can be displayed by children and young people themselves, this is sometimes referred to as harmful sexual behaviour or peer abuse.

Peer abuse and exploitation happens between similar aged children. This can happen when children are in longstanding relationships but also as a single incident on the first meeting of one another. There is nothing to suggest that abuse of a child by another child is any less damaging or impactful than abuse by an adult. We know however that the reasons children display harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) or peer abuse and exploitation may be very different to the reason adults do it. It is important that where HSB or peer abuse and exploitation is identified, both children receive the response and support they need to stop it happening and help to recover from it. On some occasions, young people may be acting in a harmful way towards a peer but may not have the realisation that their behaviour is inappropriate or causing

harm. Despite the harm that peer abuse can cause, children tell us they don't often reach out to adults for support as they don't believe adults will be able to help in stopping the behaviour. Parents have told us that in cases of HSB or peer abuse and exploitation they worry if their child is in the same school as the child who has harmed them. Where both children attend the same school there is Welsh Government guidance to support the safety and wellbeing of both children within education environments.



**Barnardos
Guidance for
Education
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Organised Networks



This form of CSE is usually adult led but may also involve the control of children by adults in targeting and recruiting other children for the purpose of exploitation.

A network may involve 2 or more adults working together who seek to exploit children sexually. But it could also be people who may loosely know each other rather than being formally connected. Unfortunately, this is not a rare form of exploitation and children who are exploited by groups or gangs may be abused by multiple people.

In this form of exploitation, children can be passed through networks of perpetrators and this abuse can sometimes take place in different locations.

The targeting of children by organised networks can lead

to the child being exposed to more than one type of harm and exposure to adult and illegal behaviours, that could lead to criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation, or vice versa.



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Children from
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This form of exploitation is often interlinked with other organised crime, such as Criminal Exploitation or County Lines. Children can often be involved in criminal activities which can involve the movement of drugs or money for personal gain.

Organised Crime Groups or gangs can often feature child sexual exploitation in their operation, and can use sex as part of initiation ceremonies, to exert power and control, or sex can be used as a weapon or punishment.

Exploitation of children in this way can again be difficult to understand and can lead to children being seen as committing crimes rather than being targeted and exploited by others. Children who are abused through formally organised

exploitation are likely to be heavily under the control of those who are exploiting them and will feel very fearful of those abusing them, but may also feel a sense of loyalty too. This can often be confusing for parents who are trying to pull their children out of this. Where exploitation is happening children will rarely be able to escape those seeking to harm them without the support of adults, including parents, carers and professionals. Occasionally the networks will use threats of or actual harm to the child's family to maintain control over them. Most children and families who are exploited in this way will need professional support to make it stop.

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Missing and Trafficked Young People



Trafficking

When a child is moved from one place to another for the purpose of exploitation it is called trafficking. This can happen to children trafficked within the UK and those trafficked from other countries into the UK.

Not all children who are reported as missing will be trafficked and not all children who are missing or trafficked will be harmed by child sexual exploitation. However, there are a crossover of vulnerabilities that would raise concern.

Unfortunately, a child who has been trafficked is often thought of by the trafficker as a commodity; this means they see the child as a way of earning money and they will feel they have invested time and money into the grooming process of that child. As a result, they will want to keep a level of

control over the child and will not want to lose them. Often, even if the child is moved away from the trafficker and the exploitation is disrupted, the trafficker will want to maintain contact.

In Wales any child who is trafficked should be referred to an Independent Child Trafficking Guardian who will be able to provide advice and support to safeguard and protect the child.



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Social Care Wales - Safeguarding Children who go Missing from Home or Care

Missing

The reasons children go missing are varied and can often be unique to the child.

We know when a child goes missing, they may be exposed to a range of risks. There are strong links between children being sexually exploited or coming to other types of harm while they are missing from home or care.

The official definition of missing under the All Wales Practice Guide is: *“Anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established will be considered as missing until located and*

their wellbeing or otherwise confirmed.”

Children going missing can be both a cause and a consequence of CSE. They may go missing to spend time with someone who is exploiting them. This person may be encouraging them to leave home. Or they may be going missing to escape someone who is exploiting them. Children may be more at risk of CSE during missing episodes when they

are away from a place of safety. Children we have worked with have told us when they have been missing, they have been exploited because someone has offered them something they need to survive, such as food or somewhere to stay.

Parents have described a range of emotions upon realising their child is missing. This can vary from sheer panic, worry and confusion, to frustration or

even anger towards the child. Particularly if their child is going missing regularly. Reporting a child as missing to the Police can be a daunting process, and parents have described how upon making the report, they have felt overwhelmed, often experiencing ‘mind blank’ when asked a range of questions about their child.

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Safeguarding Wales Child Information Form

**If you believe your child is missing,
is it important not to delay trying
to find them.**

It may be the case you have to phone the Police to report them as missing, but before doing so, have you done the following?

- Attempted to make contact with the child to check on their whereabouts
- Attempted to contact their friends or anyone you think they may be with
- Checked their social media to look for any clues as to where they may be

- If possible, go to where you think they may be (if they told you where they were going, or think of their usual hang out spots)

If you can't locate your child, reporting them as missing to the Police will be the next step. There is no set time frame that you must wait before you can report your child as missing.

The number you should contact is 101, unless you feel your child

may be at immediate risk of harm. If this is the case, you should ring 999.

You will be put through to a call handler in the Public Service Centre who will ask you a series of questions, to gather as much information as possible. It is helpful if you can give a clear description of your child and any information about their last known movements. It may be handy to have this form to

hand and ensure it is kept up to date, as a prompt for some of the questions you may be asked:

The call handler then conducts a risk assessment, will decide on how they are going to respond and will give you clear instructions on the next steps. They may log your child as missing, or they may ask you to do a few more checks yourself first.

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‘Relationship’ with Adult or Older Person

Particularly confusing to children and families is CSE that takes place in what appears, on the surface at least, to be an equal and loving relationship.

The child and family members may see the relationship as healthy to begin with and may refer to that person as a girlfriend or boyfriend. Their child may seem happy and the person they are with may make them feel loved, special and cared for. However, over time, sometimes quite quickly this can change. Others, including parents, carers and the child’s friends may notice controlling or unhealthy aspects of the relationship. The child may dismiss these or tolerate some aspects, particularly where the person hurting them also appears to be kind or supportive at other times.

This form of CSE has similarities to adult relationships that include coercive control or that are abusive and violent. Because children aren’t very experienced in relationships, they may have little else to base their

understanding of relationships on, other than what the abuser tells them. Like adult abusive relationships, children who are exploited in this way may not always recognise the signs the relationship is abusive. They may find it very difficult to end the relationship or break away from the abuser.

Parents told us that even when they and their child realised the relationship was exploitative and abusive, the abuser continued to try to have contact with them. On some occasions, the abuser was successful in pulling the child back into their control. Parents have told us they found this particularly difficult as they felt the child was choosing the abuser over them. They also felt helpless to protect their child. It is important to remember neither your child nor yourselves are to blame. It’s also important to remind your child you love them unconditionally.

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Online Harm and Exploitation

The internet can provide excellent social and educational spaces for children, with most navigating the online world safely.

We know however that child sexual exploitation can also happen online. Children who are exploited online may be targeted by adults who try to connect with them in a number of ways. This can be via social media apps, dating apps, chat rooms, gaming platforms. For example, they may share an interest in a particular game. Just like exploitation that occurs offline, the child may not know that the person they are talking with is seeking to

exploit them. The child may be tricked into sharing images of themselves or may agree to meet the person offline.

What we know from children is that the pace in which relationships are formed online can be quicker than those in offline spaces. Children tell us that they feel less anxious about sharing personal information online, may spend longer talking or have more intense

conversations with others online and may accept 'friend requests' from strangers or those who are friends of friends or acquaintances. We are also aware that children do not differentiate between online and offline spaces and relationships in the same way adults may. As such, online and offline sexual exploitation of children can overlap.

Children tell us that relationships that are formed online, in the

presence of family members and in safe spaces within the child's home can seem more authentic than those formed offline. They recognise that this can lead to them sharing information or allowing others to follow them, that in the offline world they may not feel as happy to do.

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Social Care Wales - Safeguarding Children from Online Abuse

We often warn our children that the person they are speaking to online may not be who they say they are.

Whilst of course this can and does happen, often those seeking to harm children online don't have to lie about who they are; they rely on the grooming process or fear and threats to gain control over the child.

Parents told us they often feel their children know more about technology than they do. This is ok!! However, it's important to remember adults know more

about how to keep their child safe. Installing tech packages to increase your child's safety online is important, but will only be one part of keeping them safe. Talking to children from a young age and taking an interest in their online interests and relationships may help in supporting children to tell us if something goes wrong online. Supporting children to navigate online spaces safely

and educating them around the positives and negatives of being digital citizens can empower children to thrive online.

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Child Generated Explicit Imagery



Mobile phones and other electronic devices are now a key part of young people's lives. Whilst there are many benefits to their use, we are also aware certain risks can also be present.

Most mobile phones, I pads and laptops have cameras installed. Children can be encouraged or coerced into taking and sharing sexual images or videos of themselves. This can sometimes be in the form of 'selfies' that are often referred to as 'nudes', or it can be of the child engaging themselves in a sexual act. The child may think they are only sharing the images with the person they are speaking with; however, they may then receive threats or blackmail that the image or video will be shared and may be encouraged to create and send more to stop this happening. Children have described finding themselves in situations that spiral out of control, and they feel they have no way out other than to continue to make and share images. Children can also be offered money or other goods in exchange for sexual photographs or videos of themselves.

For parents whose child has experienced exploitation in this way, they have described feeling helpless, as they are aware images and videos of their child are potentially in an online space and they have no control over who may be viewing the images. They have also described feeling disappointed in their child for taking and sharing. It is important to remember if your child has taken and shared images of themselves, they are likely to have been controlled by someone else to do this. Despite your own emotions around this, it is important to offer your child support and reassurance.

Having open conversations with your child about what they enjoy doing online as well as what worries them online, from a young age normalises monitoring of their online use and may encourage them to seek support should things go wrong.

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Formally Organised Exploitation



This form of exploitation tends to happen in groups.

Often, those seeking to target and exploit children will hold 'parties' which are designed to entice young people to attend, with the promise of a good atmosphere, alcohol and often drugs. Young people can be introduced to a culture that can seem exciting, and they may be drawn in by being allowed to take part in behaviours they ordinarily aren't allowed to do. A culture of uninhibited sex is often a feature of these parties, and it can be normalised by the adults present. Very often children are encouraged to bring their friends along. Children are often plied with alcohol or drugs and become so incapacitated they are unaware what is happening to them and in this context they are sexually harmed.

This form of sexual exploitation can often be held in houses or flats, but also in hotels. We are increasingly seeing the use of Air B&Bs to hold 'parties'.

Those seeking to exploit children can often arrange events, whereby adults and children attend, for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Such events can take place in hotels or leisure venues.

We are also aware groups from the same place of business can sexually exploit children. An example of this may be a specific take away, that will allow children to attend the premises and may offer them free food or other items, and sexual exploitation may then occur.

Other examples can include taxi drivers, shop owners.

Sexual exploitation of children can also be undertaken in venues that traditionally offer adult sex services, such as massage parlours, strip clubs and brothels. Such venues are clearly not suitable for children to attend, but children may be enticed by the perception of 'glamour' or the offer of 'work'.

This form of exploitation can also take place online and children can be targeted with the offer of opportunities that are appealing to them such as modelling contracts, progression into careers, links to the entertainment industry or to those with influence and power.

Registered sex offenders often have links to one another and may maintain contact around the recruitment and exploitation of children.

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Exploitation Within Families



CSE can and does take place within families, although the majority of CSE is extrafamilial. Sometimes parents or family members can benefit financially though allowing or facilitating the sexual exploitation of their child.

In such cases, the parents will receive money or goods in return for someone sexually abusing their child.

As a non-abusing parent, finding out your child has been sexually harmed by another parent or family member can be very difficult to comprehend. Further complexities can be experienced if you are in a relationship with the abusing parent.

The level of betrayal and hurt is likely to be significant and parents have spoken of feeling conflicted and in a state of

disbelief that someone they love would be capable of harming their child. They are likely to question how they didn't realise what was happening and could blame themselves.

When sexual abuse or exploitation occurs within family contexts, all family members including siblings are likely to be impacted and may need their own support to make sense of what has happened and recover.

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Who Displays CSE?



Those who exploit children sexually come from a wide range of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

They could be anyone, they are predominantly male, but females can and do engage in child sexual exploitation. Therefore, those who display CSE can be any gender or sexual orientation.

They may act as individuals, in groups and in gangs and may

also be known to the child either as a family member or friend. They may also be a stranger. Children can also engage in sexual exploitation of other children.; this can sometimes be led by an adult but can sometimes be peer led.

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Who Does CSE Happen To?



Any child can be sexually exploited irrespective of gender, ethnicity, social status or sexuality. CSE can happen in many different ways. The way in which children experience CSE is varied and may be part of a difficult picture of other connected safeguarding issues.

Those who harm children through CSE can often spot unmet needs for a child. This could be that the child is lonely, has low self-esteem, is struggling with family relationships or friendships, or is seeking to fit in, to name a few.

Abusers are good at identifying this and can target children and offer to meet these needs.

We know teenage years can be a difficult time for children and their families. Parents told us some of the behavior changes they noticed were initially thought to be a normal part of growing up and seeking independence. Where behaviour changes are outside of normal teenage development or remain in the longer term, it's important for parents to think

about what may be going on and to seek help. It's also important to keep talking to your child and give them permission to come to you if they need your help with anything.

Those who exploit children may build a trusted relationship with the child and the child's family or friends. This can be referred to as grooming and can happen to both the child and others in the child's life for long periods of time before anyone realises what is happening. This is one of the reasons CSE can be difficult to spot for adults and the child.

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Online and offline exploitation often overlap. Many Children whose exploitation begun online have told us that the grooming process happened more quickly in online spaces than offline. As is illustrated in the case below.

“I didn’t know them at first, but they seemed nice and when I posted that I was feeling bad after a rubbish day in school they sent me a message offering to listen. They listened to me every night that week after more bad days in school and asked if I wanted to meet up at the weekend to chat more. I was looking forward to it and felt like they really got me when no one else did. We met at a local park, and they got me some food. We spent the day together and it was all great until I wanted to leave. It was only when I said I needed to go that things

changed, they told me I couldn’t go until I did sexual stuff with them. They said I owed them, and it was the least I could do after everything they had done for me that week. I didn’t want to do it, but I didn’t know how else I was going to get away.

They contacted me again that night and said they had a picture of us doing stuff, they said they would post it if I didn’t meet them again. I felt so used and was scared they would follow through with the threat.” **14-year-old child.**

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Why Don't Children Tell?



There are many reasons why children don't tell anyone about CSE at the time it is happening to them.

Some children may not tell anyone until they feel safe to do so and, for some, this could be when they are adults themselves.

The child may have an emotional connection to the person exploiting them and be fearful of getting the person in trouble. The person exploiting them may have made threats to hurt them or someone they care about if they tell. They may have been told no one will believe them if they tell or they may think they will get into trouble themselves. The child may not have time away from the abuser or a safe space to tell.

The child may feel guilty and ashamed about what has happened to them, and they may blame themselves. They may worry about being judged or worry what their parents or other people in their lives will think. They may worry about the consequences for themselves or others.

The person abusing the child may have something the child needs, and the child may be fearful of losing that. This could be goods or items, or could be the things like accommodation, 'friendship', attention, or affection.

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The response given to a child when they disclose abuse is so important. Children have said they didn't tell anyone they were being abused because on previous occasions when they told, they were not believed, or the situation was handled badly.

Sometimes children want to tell but they can't find the right words or language to use. Parents have told us that looking back, their children were showing signs of distress, which was their way of telling, but at the time they didn't pick up on this and saw their child as misbehaving or being moody. It's important

to look out for signs of distress. Some children have told us they wanted to tell but they didn't know where to go for help. So, as well as encouraging your child to have open conversations with you about anything they are worried about, it may help to also have another 'safe adult' identified who they know they can talk to if they don't feel able to talk to you as their parent.

Some children may not disclose because they don't recognise what is happening to them is abuse. They may think the behaviour is normal and this may be due to messages the abuser

has given them, or because they are used to negative behaviours due to other life experiences they may have had.

Boys who are sexually exploited may find it particularly difficult to tell someone it is happening. Those we have supported told us that that they tried to signal something was wrong through their behaviour but felt this led to them being sanctioned or getting into trouble, either at school, at home or with police.



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Boys tell us that they feel their gender was a barrier to being asked what was wrong or what was happening to them, with many feeling they were only being seen as trouble.

This response tended to push them further towards those who were abusing them, and for many this led to other types of harm occurring. Boys also told us that there is a sense that boys should be able to look after themselves and are less vulnerable in society generally as well as within relationships. They told us that even when they recognised and understood they were being

abused they were not likely to tell as they felt embarrassed to admit they have been the victim of exploitation and the consequences of what this may mean in relation to their male identity.

Religious and cultural factors can impact on children feeling able to disclose abuse. Some practices pay particular focus to virginity (no sex before marriage) or heterosexuality. Children may feel they can't speak out about their abuse because they or their family will face negative consequences within their community, including shame,

judgement or rejection. One child told us she didn't tell anyone she had been raped because she was worried this would mean a future arranged marriage would not go ahead, and this would impact her family significantly. As a result, she suffered alone for a long period of time and didn't get the help and support she needed to recover.

Some research has indicated that victims and families from BAME communities have expressed a reluctance to report sexual exploitation to Police or Children's Services, due to a lack of trust that certain institutions would support them.



University of
Bedfordshire -
Research to help
combat under-
representation of
BAME child sexual
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Children who are LGBTQ can also experience barriers to disclosing. We are aware there is a lack of information and support for LGBTQ children, although things are improving. We know that children can look to the online world for advice and information within LGBTQ communities and this can increase potential risks posed to them, as they may connect with individuals who may wish to exploit them.

Children who are harmed in this context can be less likely to disclose, especially if they have not yet been open with their families regarding their gender

or sexual identity. For some parents, discovering their child is LGBTQ can cause difficulties as it may conflict with their own beliefs and can lead to a lot of confusion, questioning and soul searching. However, acceptance by parents of their child's sexuality or gender identity, without judgement, can support children in not feeling isolated and can be a protective factor.

Children with disabilities may experience difficulties in disclosing as they may lack the communication or language skills to be able to tell or describe what is happening to them. They

may also not receive equal access to education around healthy relationships in formal settings such as schools, meaning they may be less likely to identify abuse that happens to them.

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Identifying and Reporting Child Sexual Exploitation



Although CSE can be difficult to identify, there are some signs to look out for.

Physical Signs: You may notice your child has injuries or bruises that they aren't able to explain. It's important you ask them if you notice they have injuries to their face or body. They may try to cover these up. We know children and young people experiment sexually and this can be a normative part of their development. Unfortunately, sometimes this can result in them picking up an STI (sexually transmitted infection) or experiencing unplanned pregnancies. It's always helpful to have conversations with your child around safe sex, no matter how embarrassing it may be for you or for them! Concern should increase if you are aware your child has frequent or multiple STI's. Pay particular attention if they appear to be in pain or discomfort or if you notice anything worrying or unusual.

Emotional signs: You know your child well and you will know what mood state is quite normal for them. If you notice changes that seem outside of what would be expected for the difficult teenage years, then question could this be because something is wrong. Keep an eye out if your child becomes withdrawn, if their mood changes seem more extreme than normal, if they are withdrawing from you, friends, family, or other activities. Children who are victims of CSE can often present as very angry due to what is happening to them. Be on the lookout for signs of distress, such as self-harming or suicidal thoughts/ behaviours.

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Material signs: Some material signs can help us identify CSE. You will have a good idea of how much money your child earns, whether that's through pocket money or payment through education/ a job. If you notice your child is in possession of items and you or they can't explain how they got or paid for them, it could be a sign someone is giving them items in exchange for something. This could be mobile phones or other technology, it could be clothes or shoes, or they could have cash. You may discover your child in possession of alcohol or drugs, or you may be aware they are using them. If it doesn't feel right, go with your gut and ask more questions.

Behaviour signs: Children's behaviour can often be a sign that something is wrong long before they tell us. As

they grow older, children want more independence and privacy, and this is a normal part of their development. However, if your child is very secretive, this could be a sign they are hiding that something is wrong. Children are notoriously private with their gadgets, but if you have concerns over how your child is using their phone or the internet, it could be that they are in communication with someone of concern. Going missing will increase concern linked to CSE. If your child is being driven in vehicles by adults and you don't know who they are, this is a worry. Sometimes the behaviour of children who are being sexually exploited can become extreme and they can be described as out of control and risky by their family or by professionals. This change in behaviour could be a sign of exploitation.

If you spot the signs and become worried your child could be vulnerable to exploitation or could be experiencing exploitation, it's important you talk to someone about your concerns. If you contact your local Children's Services and tell them what you are worried about, they will listen to your worries and offer you advice and support. **If your child discloses a sexual assault or if you think they are at immediate risk, contact the Police on 101/ 999.**

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What Makes Some Children More Vulnerable to CSE



Although any child can be sexually exploited, we know some children can be more vulnerable than others, based on their circumstances or experiences.

However, it's important to remember it doesn't mean every child with a specific set of vulnerabilities will be abused through CSE, nor does it mean that children without particular vulnerabilities will not be abused through CSE.

Adverse childhood experiences (known as ACE's) lead to children being particularly vulnerable. ACES can be suffering any form of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual, neglect), it can be as a result of living in a home with domestic abuse, alcohol or drug abuse. Or even parental separation that has been experienced negatively by the child.

Difficult early years and exposure to stress can leave children with unmet needs (for example low self-esteem, loneliness) and this could make them more vulnerable to exploitation, as someone may offer to meet those needs, with the intention of harming or exploiting the child. Again, it's important to remember children who have not suffered ACES can also be sexually exploited.

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Children who are care experienced and those who have been moved around several placements can be particularly vulnerable to CSE. However, children who live at home are also sexually exploited.

We know that children with disabilities can have more overall vulnerabilities, and this includes vulnerability to CSE. Sometimes parents want to protect and shield their child from sexual matters due to their disability, or they may find it hard to accept their child is developing sexually if they have a disability.

Whilst we know parents do this with the best intentions, it can lead to children with disabilities being socially isolated, and lacking insight around sexual matters. This may be because they don't have access to sex education or an understanding of what is normal or healthy, which makes it

hard for them to then recognise when behaviour towards them is unhealthy or abusive.

Children who have previously experienced sexual abuse may be more likely to be vulnerable to CSE. Early sexualisation of children can leave them with confusing messages about self and others. When the impact of child sexual abuse is not reconciled, and any unhealthy learning remains, confusion persists, increasing the child's vulnerability within relationships. This may mean those seeking to exploit children may recognise this and target the child.

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Developmental Approaches



We are aware that for some children who have experienced ACE's there may be many related impacts, that can be both immediate and longer lasting.

This can include impacts upon their emotional, social, behavioural, physical and brain development. This can mean that the child may struggle in some areas, including at school, with friendships or in managing difficult or painful feelings. Parents and carers told us they need to respond differently to children who have been exposed to ACES and whose development has been impacted. They also have to meet the child needs in different ways in comparison to those who have not experienced ACES.

"I have cared for many children over the years, they are all great kids. I remember one boy, he came to stay with us when he was 14 but looked much older. I remember having to remind people that while he looked older he was still only a child. People seemed to expect much more from him because he looked older. At school he was working at around age 10. Socially he preferred spending time with children that were younger than him, around 11 or 12. Other children his age didn't get him really and to be fair he didn't always know how to be with them either. He would want to spend time out of the house but would get into disagreements with other boys and

girls and be home in no time at all. There were a few times we had to go to the park or shops with him, just to help him in sorting out any differences or in making up with others he had fallen out with. He didn't really have the skills he needed to do it for himself when he first came to live with us, but he got there. He just needed a bit of understanding and practice to get there. It took a while, my grandchildren helped him too. It was a bit frustrating at the time but when I saw the improvements and the way it raised his confidence, it was worth it." Foster Carer of 8 years.

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Children themselves may also recognise areas where they struggle but may not be sure what they can do to manage differently.

“I would just fly off the handle and stuff, it could be if someone looked at me in a certain way or if I thought they were having a go. I didn’t really trust people and if I am honest, I didn’t expect people to help me. It took a while, but once I realised they always responded to me in the same way and helped me to calm down or see things differently, rather than hitting out, I began to trust them to help me. We still joke about the red mist coming down, but now I can see it and feel it for myself before I fly off the handle. It has made such a difference to me at school and with keeping friends”

Taking an approach that understands where the child is functioning developmentally across each area can really help in parenting them in a way that is most helpful to them and you. Even though they may be a teenager and in some areas will be exactly where they should be developmentally, taking time to think about what the child’s behaviour or responses in situations is telling us about areas of development can help parents and carers to understand that the behaviour or responses are not personal to them and are areas where the child may need additional support, so their development across each

area is able to reach what is expected for their actual age.

Keeping this in mind, as well as acknowledging other areas of developmental delay caused by other factors not related to ACE’s will help in parenting with developmental awareness. The models below have some tips to remind us what we can do to help.

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Think about a child you care for and their actual age. Then consider where you may place their emotional age.

A good way to think about this is to consider their ability to manage situations such as relationship fall outs with peers, not getting something they want, or having to go to school when they don't want to. Then consider what you think their emotional age may be. For example, a 15 year old displaying foot stamping or tantrum like behaviours may signal that their emotional age is more in line with what we would expect from a younger child. In the moment, when the child is behaving in this way we need to parent them as we would a younger child, so more in line with their

emotional age. When we do this we are parenting with emotional awareness and it helps the child feel understood.

Responding with emotional awareness helps the child to develop trust in us, to see that we can help them regulate at times of difficulty or distress. Co-regulating children at times of distress or difficulty helps them to develop the skills to eventually do this for themselves for most of the time.



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Children who are at risk of or who have been harmed by CSE can be wrongly described as having advanced sexual development.

It is important to remember that children who are introduced to sexual behaviour and information at an age or stage of development where they are not ready to experience or understand it, will have disrupted sexual development. This can mean they can be left with unhealthy learning and beliefs about themselves and what has happened to them.

We can sometimes focus on the sexual behaviour without properly exploring the non-sexual needs the behaviour may be meeting. Adults who abuse

and exploit children sexually may seek to meet needs such as emotional connection, loneliness or intimacy for the child, as part of the sexual exploitation.

Taking a developmental approach to parenting can help children develop skills and abilities that match their actual age and in the process can help reduce the risk of CSE or other harms for children whose development has been negatively impacted by their own experiences of harm.

Emotionally

Take feelings seriously and help make sense of them (label them)

Create a safe environment in which the child feels they can open up and share difficulties

Treat behaviour as an expression of emotions; try to work out what the behaviour is communicating

Don't meet strongly expressed emotions with more strong emotions

Socially

Support them to take on more (less) responsibilities

Teach reasonable risks and safe limits

Support healthy friendships and age appropriate social activities

Establish fair and consistent rules

Cognitively

Provide opportunities for new challenging experiences

Help to problem solve difficulties

Encourage them to set goals and help to manage time effectively

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Impact of CSE - Child and Wider Family



We know it can be difficult for everyone involved to understand what has happened as well as understanding how the exploitation begun and continued. Parents and carers have told us that they went through a range of difficult and painful feelings when they found out what had been happening to their child.

They told us they felt sad, angry and confused as well as guilty, often blaming themselves for not realising sooner what had been happening.

Some parents spoke about how the exploitation made them feel like they had lost their child for a while, leaving them feeling powerless. They told us that lots of professionals tried to help but at the time it didn't always feel that way, as outlined below.

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“Looking back, I know people were doing their jobs and trying to help us stop the abuse but there were times where we felt our home was not ours. There would be police calling to check our child was safe, particularly if we had reported them as being missing. Then other workers and social workers would call to find out where our child had been, who they had been with and what had happened. There was one time where the police bought our child back at 3.00am, we were glad of course but it woke our other children up and they had school the next day. Then the next morning we had social workers ringing and calling as well as the school to ask why our children had arrived late. There was one time where our oldest

child refused to go to school. It went on for a few days and they eventually told us they were getting questioned by other children and teachers about their sister as they had seen she was missing on social media. It can feel so difficult to explain what is happening and you also feel like a bad parent, even when you have sat up half the night worrying about your child.

You get exhausted and while I am glad our child got the help they needed, there wasn't really that much support for us. In fact, sometimes we felt we were being blamed.”

Parent of 14 year old girl.

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Looking after yourself is such an important part of responding to the impact of CSE on the family. However, parents and other children in the family can have their needs overlooked and can overlook them for themselves too.

Parents and carers told us that when they were referred to parents support groups they felt the focus didn't always fit with what was happening in their families. Worryingly, some parents told us that they felt further isolated as their attendance at the group highlighted the very different needs of their families to those of families where support needs were not related to CSE.

Where parents and carers have their own vulnerabilities, being consistently available both physically and emotionally for their child can be difficult. If parents have previous experience of statutory services, particularly if these have been negative, they can be fearful of contacting them for support or may resist any support offered. Most professionals will be aware of this

and try to work in a way that is most helpful to you, but if you are able, letting professionals know that you are finding things difficult and the reasons why can help improve relationships.

Some parents have described how they didn't feel their concerns were being treated seriously when they shared them with professionals. Some parents have told us they felt like a nuisance for continually raising and reporting concerns about their child. If you are worried about your child and you don't feel like you or they are getting the response you should, you can escalate your concerns via senior managers in Children's Services.

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Although difficult, we encourage parents to speak up for themselves and their children, and when they don't feel able to do this, seek support from someone who is able to help them in expressing their views, concerns, wishes and feelings.

Where parents and carers have their own CSE or CSA experiences, hearing that their child is being sexually exploited can be distressing and can trigger previous memories about their own experience. This can feel overwhelming or frightening. They may notice some previous thought patterns or behaviours return. For example, parents told us they experienced nightmares, panic attacks, periods of low mood, as well as impacts upon their current relationship.

If your child has been sexually harmed or assaulted, this will be very difficult to come to terms with and you are likely to find it hard to know how to react or support them. As well as having a significant impact on the child, it will also impact on parents/ carers. As a parent, you may feel a range of emotions

including shock, anger, upset, disbelief. Parents have spoken to us about general feelings of helplessness, and they can often experience guilt and self-blame for not being able to protect their child. It is common to feel overwhelmed with very difficult thoughts and feelings. Some parents have also discussed feeling angry, sometimes even feeling angry towards their child. Children who have been exploited react in different ways and parents can often feel confused if their child has been sexually abused or exploited but they don't act how parents expect them to following the abuse.



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Safeguarding and Investigations



Following the CSE becoming known or suspected there are likely to be lots of assessments being completed and meetings to attend. This can feel overwhelming and confusing to parents and carers.

Professionals may use language or terms that are unfamiliar to you, it can feel like they are talking a different language. Asking them what terms mean can remind professionals that using them is not helpful in supporting you to understand what it is happening, or your role and professional expectations of you in supporting your child.

As investigations progress you may hear information about your child and what has happened to them that is distressing. Attending meetings or the impact of hearing the information can mean you need time off work or are not able to continue meeting other caring responsibilities. It is important that you tell professionals if this is the case so that more suitable times for meetings can be arranged

and support for you in meetings can be put in place too.

Feeling blamed or judged during investigation processes for CSE is a common complaint from parents and carers. This can be amplified for parents and carers who have needed support from statutory services themselves. Reminding yourself that the person who has harmed your child or is seeking to harm your child holds responsibility for the harm is important. Alongside this, reminding yourself of all the good things you are doing or are seeking to do to keep your child safe may help in being kinder to yourself.

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Where CSE has occurred online, digital devices may be removed from family homes to support the investigation.

This can be particularly disruptive to other family members, particularly other children who may rely on the devices to socialise or keep on top of school work. This can add to distress and disruption as well as causing siblings to become frustrated with the child who has been harmed.

Knowledge of your child's experience may become known in the community. People may talk about what has happened or you may feel like they are, and sometimes events can be misinterpreted from the truth. Parents have told us this is particularly distressing and

can lead to them feeling very judged, isolated and self-conscious, often wanting to avoid normal situations such as going to the shops or doing the school run. If public discussions are being held on social media, this can feel very intrusive. It's important if you experience difficulties in the community that you seek support. You may be able to ask Children's Services for support, as well as reaching out to the school for help, or your local PCSO and other community links. It's important you speak to family or friends about how you are feeling or what you are experiencing so they can support you and you don't struggle alone.

As part of investigations your child may be asked to participate in a medical assessment as well as talking assessments. It is up to your child as to how much they engage in this process. We know that this process can be difficult but those who undertake the medical assessments will be specially trained in CSE and will work in a way that is most comfortable for your child. Younger children may have a parent or carer present during the assessment but teenagers may decide to do this without parent or carer support. If this is the case, they are still likely to need emotional support from you afterwards.

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As a parent or carer, keeping you informed during the investigation process and including you in safeguarding arrangements and safety planning will be key to you being best able to support your child.

This can however be difficult and we know that parents and carers may need their own support in place to understand and recall what is agreed in the meetings attended. Writing things down or asking for written information to help you remember what is agreed and expected is fine to do.

It is important to remember that with the right support and help things will get better. The harm your child has experienced will not change but in time you will be able to move forward as a family again.

Following sexual assault, support needs will be both physical and emotional. Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARC) offer medical, practical and emotional support to victims of rape or sexual assault. They are available to anyone and can be accessed 24 hours a day. SARC workers are specially trained doctors, nurses and support workers. They offer help regarding practical matters, such as undertaking forensic medical examinations. These examinations will look after the child's medical needs, as well as collect forensic evidence which can help in Police investigations against the person who

has harmed them. Support around accessing emergency contraception and sexual health support in respect of STI's is also available. They will also signpost on to other support services.

Via the SARC, anyone under 18 can be allocated a YPISVA (Young Person's Independent Sexual Violence Advisor).

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Their role is to ensure the child receives the best care possible. They offer emotional support, advocacy and assistance with health appointments, and they will attend meetings after the initial visit to the SARC. Their focus is to ensure the child is always believed and is treated with dignity.

Your child will be asked whether they wish to make a formal complaint. It's important that they have a sense of choice and control over this. Some children will wish to pursue complaints immediately after incidents have been reported, whilst others don't feel able to at the time but may feel they want to in the future. If your child wishes to make a complaint, specially trained Police officers will be allocated. They will support your child in providing a statement and will keep

both your child and yourself informed of the investigation as it progresses.

We know that not all investigations progress as the child or family hoped it would. This can mean sometimes a decision of no further action is taken by Police. On other occasions, a decision may be made not to charge the person who has allegedly caused harm. This decision is made by the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service). They may make this decision because they feel there is not enough evidence, and it would not be in the child's best interest to progress. Children and parents have told us learning about these decisions can lead to them feeling very disappointed and angry, with a sense of injustice. It is important to reassure your child that despite the complaint not

progressing, they are believed. Children have told us that when they have had their experiences validated by those around them, this has been an important feature of their recovery.



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Where cases do progress to prosecution, the legal system can be difficult to understand. Courtrooms can use language that is very confusing and makes little sense to people who don't work in the legal field.

If your child needs to give evidence in court, they are entitled to special help and treatment due to their age and vulnerability. Measures are put in place to support them to give their best evidence and to reduce their stress and anxiety on the day. This can include staff within the court removing their wigs, so they seem more 'normal'. Your child can sit behind a screen or give evidence via video link so they don't have to face their abuser, or they can provide

pre-recorded video evidence. Courtrooms can be intimidating places, so your child may also be invited to visit the court before the trial. This will allow them to look around and familiarise themselves with the set-up of the court.



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Recovery



Stopping the abuse happening and taking steps to prevent it happening again are really important aspects of CSE prevention.

Supporting your child to recover and recognising your own recovery needs are also crucial. We know that believing your child, giving them time to tell and creating a relationship where they feel able to come to you for support are all helpful to recovery.

Each child who experiences CSE will have needs that are unique to them. We know however that survivors of CSE highlight some common areas of need in relation to recovery and moving forward. These may include both practical and emotional supports, for example, helping a child to return to school or pursue other education, training or employment opportunities. Reconnecting with previous friends or social groups that were in the child's life before the CSE happened. Accessing therapeutic support that allows the child to work through what has happened to them at a

pace they can tolerate and in a way that is most accessible to them. Rebalancing any harmful beliefs about themselves or relationships that the child has developed will also be important in their recovery journey. As well as supporting them to develop more accurate messages about them, their identity and all they have to offer in future relationships will give the child a sense of hope for their future.



**Centre of Expertise on
Child Sexual Abuse -
Supporting parents of
sexually exploited
young people**

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Protective Factors - How Can You Help?



It can be really difficult to know what you can do as a parent or carer to stop the exploitation of your child happening.

Knowing and spotting the signs, then talking to your child about any worries you have can be a good way to tell and show them you care and are worried about their safety. It can be daunting to know where to start but opening up a conversation will probably work best when you are both calm and feel safe to talk. If your child is at risk of exploitation this may be a good first step to helping them see the warning signs and stopping the exploitation of them happening.

Where children have come to harm or have been groomed by the person exploiting them conversations can still help. However, both you and your child may need additional support from professionals to help disrupt or stop the abuse continuing as well as helping your child, yourself and other family members recover.

We know that it can be difficult for everyone in the family when a child is being sexually exploited and there is no one thing that can prevent children being targeted and harmed. We know however that what we do as parents and carers when CSE is discovered can help in stopping the abuse continuing.

Being both physically and emotionally available to your child can be difficult when you are feeling anxious or worried about them yourself. But letting them know you are there for them, love them and want to help no matter what will encourage them to come to you for support if or when they need to.

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Being consistent in this response to your child, even when things are difficult will help them feel safe to come to you. If there are times where you recognise you are not in the right place or frame of mind to be there for your child, having other family members that can replicate this response to your child may be more helpful to all parties. It is important that your child has a close relationship with a trusted adult but this does not always have to be you. There will be times where your child needs support from others too, what is important is that they have support available to them from a safe adult, when they need it.

If this happens it can be hard not to take this personally, after all you are their parent or carer. But remember the reason's why children may seek support from others are varied and can include attempts to protect you too. Letting your child know that getting the help they need is what is important rather than them always having to come to you and no matter what they are a family member who is loved.

When a child is missing from home, parents tell us they experience a range of emotions. They can feel stressed, worried, helpless; they can also feel annoyed with their child and frustrated, especially if they regularly go missing. The approach parents use when their child returns home is important. Although parents may want to tell the child off or punish them, in the first instance, making the child physically comfortable and receiving them home in a way that makes them feel safe is crucial. Children have told us that fear of parents or carers becoming angry with them when they return has made them stay away from home longer and delayed their return. Welcoming the child, telling them you missed them, explaining how happy you are to see them, asking them if they are ok, offering them food, a warm drink, a bath/ shower and clean clothes, could really make a difference.

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Check Your
Thinking Website

Helping your child to know and feel that things can get better for them is a really important part of helping them recover from CSE.

Being there for them, doing normal things and reminding them of the great things about them can be a really positive way to help them have some hope for their future, even on dark days.

Making sure that your child is safe and can reach out to you at any time can be exhausting. It is really important that you take care of yourself and accept any support and help you or others identify you as needing. We know that some parents have their own experiences of CSE or other abuse and trauma, which can mean some aspects of

caring for their child can be difficult. Parents have told us that talking about CSE or having lots of professionals in their life can bring back unhappy or painful memories for them.

“I found it so hard you know, I wanted to work with the support workers, but I was frightened about what they thought of me. They gave me a leaflet about CSE, they were just being helpful, but it had happened to me too. I just pushed it away, it was too difficult for me to look at it, it brought back stuff I hadn’t properly dealt with. When they left the house, I was sick, I had stomach pains and my

head hurt for the next week. The next time they came to the house one of the workers asked if I was ok, she said I seemed spaced out. It took a while for me to trust them and tell them it had happened to me too, so I was finding it hard. They really understood you know; they even came to the GP with me. They explained that I was having triggers back to my own abuse and understood that it was difficult. I knew that I had to get help for me if I was going to help my child.”

Mother of 13 year old.

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Relationship Repair and Safety Planning



CSE can put a real strain on the relationships children have with others, including family members. Getting relationships back on track after CSE can be tricky but it is possible.

Parents have told us that it can feel like they have lost part of their relationship with their child and wonder if their relationship can heal. Reconnecting with your child will be a really important part of their recovery journey. Communicating the positive things about them, noticing the things you like about the time you spend together and telling them, as well as being open about any future worries you have can help things improve after CSE.

Safety planning may be part of your child's recovery. We know that abusers can have a hold on the child for a long time after the abuse of them stops. Understanding this and being part of a safety plan you, your child and professionals agree with can be a big help in knowing what steps to take if you have worries about their safety. It is best if the plan involves the child

as that way they will be aware of what actions and steps adults will put in place if they begin to have worries about CSE in the future. It will also help your child feel safe, knowing the steps that are being put in place. Making a plan when everyone is calm will help if your child is contacted by the abuser or goes missing to meet them. Having a plan does not mean you need to rely on it to keep your child safe, it is part of the process, but being there, building trust in your relationship and letting them know you love them no matter what, are the things that will help get your relationship back on track.

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