

### Summary

Sexual abuse is largely hidden and can be difficult to uncover. Unlike physical abuse or neglect there are no clear signs. Detection of sexual abuse often relies on children making a disclosure, but they are often too frightened or ashamed to do so. Victims may wait many years before telling anyone about their abuse. Research has shown that nearly a quarter of young adults have experienced some form of sexual abuse by an adult or peer during childhood. Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup>

There are generally two different types of child sexual abuse:

**Contact abuse** – involves touching, where the abuser makes physical contact with the child, including penetrative abuse.

**Non-contact abuse** – involves non-touching activities such as grooming, online abuse, encouraging children to make, view or distribute child abuse images.<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to define [child sexual abuse](#) as there are many different ways in which a child can be sexually abused or exploited. Succinct definitions are not able to incorporate all these different forms of abuse.

### Risk factors

- Having previously experienced abuse, especially sexual abuse, having a disrupted home life or being neglected by parents.
- Children who are isolated, do not have many friends or experience domestic violence at home.
- Having parents who misuse substances, homes with many adults coming and going and where children may be left alone for long periods.
- Children with disabilities
- Unsafe use of the internet.<sup>1</sup>

Perpetrators of sexual abuse are usually known to the child and they are more likely to be a family friend rather than a parent or stranger. Up to one third of child sexual abuse is committed by another child or young person.

### Effects of child sexual abuse can include:

Depression • eating disorders • post-traumatic stress • impaired ability to cope with stress/emotions • self-blame • self-harm • suicide/suicidal ideation.<sup>1</sup>

### Identification of child sexual abuse

There are no clear signs that a child is being sexually abused. Changes in the child's behaviour that reflect the effects of abuse can be an indication, e.g. fear of being alone, sleep

disturbance, problems at school, anxiety, risk-taking.<sup>1</sup> As child sexual abuse is often only detected through disclosure from the child, it is important that the child is able to confide in someone and has a safe place to do so. It is also important that people understand the difficulties children might have in disclosing abuse, usually through fear of the consequences, shame, self-blame, fear of not being believed. Primary prevention of child sexual abuse concentrates on creating safer environments for children, at home, at school and online in order to better protect children.<sup>3</sup>

### Local learning

Review of a local case raised some important issues in relation to identification of child sexual abuse and the interagency response to it.

- There was an over reliance on the risk assessment of one professional, who may have been overly optimistic about the risk presented by the perpetrator. This indicated a need for authoritative practice in complex cases as detailed in the triennial analysis of serious case reviews.<sup>4</sup> The principles of authoritative practice are outlined as: the ability to exercise professional judgement, maintaining a stance of professional curiosity and challenge, each professional taking responsibility for their role in the safeguarding process, while respecting and valuing the roles of others alongside relationships of trust with children, young people and parents.
- Opportunities were missed to carry out a thorough assessment for the child. This meant that the child's voice was not heard – the child was not spoken to in private and their needs were not explored. The mother's experiences, needs and capabilities were not taken into account. The wider family dynamics were not considered in relation to the denial and communication patterns of the grooming process.

For more information on the Islands Safeguarding Children Partnership for Guernsey and Alderney please contact: David Foote, ISCP Business Manager – [david.foote@gov.gg](mailto:david.foote@gov.gg). Or visit the [ISCP website](#) for relevant local information and guidance: [ISCP.GG](#).

<sup>1</sup> NSPCC (2013) *Child sexual abuse: an NSPCC research briefing* [pdf]. Available at:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/information-service/research-briefing-child-sexual-abuse.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> NSPCC (2017) *What is sexual abuse* [online]. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/>.

<sup>3</sup> NSPCC (2017) *Preventing sexual abuse* [online]. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/preventing-child-sexual-abuse/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sidebotham, P., Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Dodsworth, J., Garstang, J., Harrison, E., Retzer, A. and Sorensen, P. (2016) *Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: Final report*. London: HMSO.