

**This Learning Guide has been developed to provide those working with children, young people and their families and understanding of what is meant by the term ‘familial child sexual abuse’, the impact that it can have on children and young people, how to identify it and what action to take in response.**

### **What do we mean by ‘familial child sexual abuse’?**

The Government Statutory Guidance, [Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018](#), provides the following description of child sexual abuse (page 104):

*Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.*

Specifically, child sexual abuse in the family environment was defined in the Children’s Commissioners report, [Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action](#), November 2015, as:

*“sexual abuse perpetrated or facilitated in or out of the home, against a child under the age of 18, by a family member or someone otherwise linked to the family context or environment, whether or not they are a family member. Within this definition, perpetrators may be close to the victim (e.g. father, uncle, stepfather) or less familiar (e.g. family friend, babysitter). We also know that perpetrators can be female, such as a mother, aunt, or step-mother.*

Any child or young person can be affected by sexual abuse but they may be more at risk if there has been previous sexual abuse, have a physical or learning disability, are socially isolated, a disrupted home life or have experienced other forms of abuse (known as poly victimisation).

### **What are the possible indicators?**

Professionals should be aware of the warning signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse, and respond to those indicators so that problems can be addressed as early as possible and the right support and services for the child, young person and their family provided. Indicators can include:

- Physical symptoms, such as damage to sexual organs, such as bruising, sexually transmitted infection, pregnancy, starting to wet or soil themselves
- Emotional and physiological signs, such as anxiety or mental health issues, such as eating disorders, problems with sleeping, self-harm, low self-esteem and withdrawing
- Behavioural signs, including changes in behaviour, avoiding being alone with particular adults, exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours, including sexualised ideas, running away or going missing, poor school/college attendance, falling off of educational attainment, difficulties in concentration and substance misuse.

A child may talk more freely about activities which indicate that they are being ‘groomed’ for future sexual abuse. Indirect cries for help are common e.g. indirect comments such as “I don’t like it when Jo comes to babysit”; keeping a journal of secrets; attention seeking behaviour; reporting less serious experiences e.g. bottom pinching, cuddles that ‘hurt’, to see if they would be believed, making practitioner professional curiosity a response needed to establish a clearer picture of what may be happening and to explain the behaviour of the child.

### **Impact of sexual abuse across the life course**

Familial child sexual abuse can act as a ‘push’ factor, making children look outside of the home for support, friendship and love, thus putting them at greater risk of other forms of abuse and danger outside of the family environment, such as exploitation. Research has identified the far reaching and fundamental effects that sexual abuse in childhood can have into adult life including mental ill-health, including Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), self-harm and suicide, impact on brain functioning, such as dissociation, memory impairment and reduced social functioning, including issues with sexual relationships. Behavioural problems can include anti-social and criminal behaviour. Adults who were abused as children can go on to struggle with their own parenting and may even go on to abuse themselves.

## Key Messages

- Child sexual abuse (CSA) in the family represents approximately 2/3 of all reported CSA and occurs in families from all socio-economic, educational, ethnic and religious backgrounds.
- Familial child sexual abuse is very *unlikely* to be an isolated incident and may go on for years as a 'hidden' issue, starting early when a child is too young to fully understand what is happening, only recognising that they were abused later in life. This means that the true scale of this form of abuse is likely to be significantly higher than official statistics suggest.
- Girls are more likely to suffer from this form of abuse than boys, but again males are likely to be under-represented in figures due to low levels of disclosure.
- It is more likely to be perpetrated by a male and around a quarter of cases, the perpetrator might also be under 18 (e.g. a sibling, cousin).
- It may remain undisclosed as the child may not wish to split the family up, get a family member in trouble, feels partially to blame and also recognises the associated stigma. They may also have had a negative experience when trying to speak to someone or simply don't know who to turn to.
- A child sexually abused by a family member is likely to suffer greater turmoil, distress and emotional abuse due to the relationship that they have with the perpetrator and that would have been one of trust.

## How to respond?

**Prevention:** Support with parenting. Early education provision on sex, relationships and keeping your body safe. Supporting the development of resilience. Ensuring all children have someone outside of the family to speak to such as a mentor, advocate and a safe place to go.

**Reporting:** As with all child protection issues, any suspicion of familial child sexual abuse, or a disclosure, should be reported immediately, via a [Multi-Agency Referral Form \(MARF\)](#), in liaison with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) in your agency, to Children's Social Care via

[CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk) or 020 8708 3885 (out of hours number 020 8708 5897). Where a child is at immediate risk, the Police should also be contacted via 999. For full information on making a referral, see the [LSCB website page – Worried about a child?](#)

**Protection:** The child will need to be kept safe whilst agencies respond. If a child or young person makes a disclosure of familial sexual abuse, it is of course even more important that care is taken not to expose them to further risk if the perpetrator is someone within the family or close network by reporting back to the family.

## Further Reading & Learning

- Redbridge [LSCB website](#) for information on [child abuse](#), [child sexual abuse \(including sexual abuse in the family\)](#), and [Harmful Sexual Behaviour \(HSB\)](#) for professionals.
- LSCB Training Course – [Harmful Sexual Behaviours](#)
- [Key messages from research on intra-familial child sexual abuse](#), June 2018, Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA)
- [Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action](#), November 2015, Children's Commissioner ([Summary](#))
- ["It's a lonely journey" – A Rapid Evidence Assessment on intrafamilial child sexual abuse](#), Children's Commissioner, 2014
- Practice Tool: [Intra-familial child sexual abuse: Risk factors, indicators and protective factors](#), April 2018, Research in Practice (RiP)
- Serious Case Reviews – the NSPCC SCR [on-line repository](#) can be searched for cases involving familial child sexual abuse. Examples include [Child 'F', Windsor & Maidenhead Safeguarding Children Board \(SCB\)](#), a complex case of familial abuse; ['Bonnie', Devon SCB](#), a young child sexual abused by her grandfather whilst on a SGO; [Case 'Y', Norfolk SCB](#), sexual abuse of six siblings by their father, and [Children 'A – E', Lincolnshire SCB](#), 13 year old male sexual relationship with two younger sisters.
- The [NSPCC](#) has published stories from children on their experiences of familial sexual abuse. See ['Gareth's Story'](#) and ['Alice's Story'](#).

## Useful Contacts

Redbridge LSCB: 020 8708 3289

Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO): 020 8708 5350

If you are concerned about a child, call the Child Protection and Assessment Team (CPAT) on 020 8708 3885

(020 8708 5897 after 17:00 and at weekends) or e-mail [CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk](mailto:CPAT.Referrals@redbridge.gov.uk).

In an emergency, call the Police on 999.