

# A Parent's Guide To Overcoming Sexual Harm



**Safe!** Support for Young People  
Affected by Crime

Oxford Health **NHS**  
NHS Foundation Trust

  
**Horizon**  
Supporting young people and families affected by sexual harm

# About this guide

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Finding out that your child has experienced sexual harm is upsetting, challenging, and traumatising in its own right. You may find it difficult to believe at first. It is normal for you to find it difficult to make sense of what has happened, and to have your own grief and shock to manage, as well as your child's.

The effects of sexual harm can ripple through the whole family and friends close to the family. Many people close to you may be struggling in response to the news, too, in similar or different ways.

Please remember that it is important to look after yourself so that you can provide a calming, supportive and safe environment for your child as best you can.

We hope that this guide can be a helpful resource and answer some questions you may have at this difficult time.

Not all of the information contained in this booklet will apply to you and your child, and it is not intended to be a set of instructions or rules. It is not a 'fix everything' book.

We aim to describe what other parents in your shoes have experienced, and provide information that helped them to understand the normal patterns of responses after a traumatic event. The guide also contains some tips and suggestions of things you may find helpful to think about whilst supporting your child.

We have also included pointers for what might be helpful as a 'next step' should these normal difficulties persist and become more problematic.

*'I am not what happened to me,  
I am what I choose to become.'*

*- Carl Jung*

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# 1. What is trauma? What is a normal response to traumatic events?

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What do we mean when we talk about trauma?

- A trauma is a highly distressing event which overwhelms someone's ability to cope.
- It can be experienced, witnessed, or heard-about.
- It can be a single event, or many events over a period of time.

After a traumatic event children and young people show a wide range of normal responses. Many of these are part of the natural process of reacting to what happened and will settle as the person recovers.

Most often, responses are shown through changes in behaviour, so be aware of what new behaviours might say about how your child is coping.

Normal responses can include:

## **Feeling anxious**

*Look out for:* panic attacks, phobias, becoming clingy or afraid to be apart from you, over-estimating danger, avoiding things that may remind them of what happened (places, smells etc.), eating less, sleeping less, having nightmares, being 'jumpy' or easily startled, stomach aches, headaches, feeling sick, becoming distrustful or frightened of people or places, decreased attention.

## **Feeling sad**

*Look out for:* being tearful, withdrawing from friends and activities, eating less, sleeping less, having less self-confidence, having thoughts about being better off dead, feeling worthless, feeling hopeless, decreased short-term memory.

## **Being less able to manage emotions**

*Look out for:* aggression, violence, tantrums, arguments, anger, 'acting out', truancy, stealing, purposefully breaking rules, self-injuring (head banging, biting, hitting self, cutting), 'zoning out'.

## **Other things that can happen**

- Having trouble remembering things.
- Having "flashbacks" or vivid memories, where the person feels like they are back in the bad situation.
- Refusing school and/or performing worse at school.
- Doing things you may expect from a child of a younger age – e.g. bed wetting.
- Re-creating the situations in play or story-telling games.
- Being pre-occupied with sexual thoughts and feelings, displaying sexualised behaviour, including inappropriate play or touch with others.

Normal emotional responses to traumatic events may include...



It is common for parents to also experience these after finding out about sexual harm happening to their child.

## **Remember...**

Most affected children will, in time, fully enjoy friendships, fun and family life again, and reach their potential.

You are working with services because you want to do the best for your child(ren), and to support them.

Children have the best chance of recovery if:

***Any sexual harm is discovered and stopped.***

***Their parents believe and support them.***

***They get any additional help they need to support their recovery, if this isn't happening naturally.***

***They feel safe and are protected from further harm.***

## 2. The specific impact of sexual abuse

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More than other types of traumatic events, sexual abuse is secretive. We know that abusers use manipulation, lies and threats to keep the young person from breaking the silence. Because of this dynamic, sexual abuse can have a different impact on young people and their families than other kinds of traumatic event.

Abusers often gain and then break their victim's **trust**, so one of the most common results of sexual abuse is its impact on trust. Young people may find it extremely difficult to trust other people, or their own judgement about others. This may be true for you, too.

Because of the lies they may have been told by their abuser, because they were not able to prevent it, or because they did not realise what was happening was wrong, young people may **blame** themselves for what happened, and feel bad or worthless.

Young people may also feel that someone else should have noticed or prevented the abuse, and **blame** their parents or other adults for it happening.

Sexual abuse in childhood **disrupts learning** about healthy relationships and sex. This is because the young person has been inappropriately introduced to sexual concepts, and experienced this in the context of an abusive interaction.

As a result of sexual abuse, children may show '**sexualised behaviour**'. This may lead them to be rejected by peers, or 'told off' - further affecting **self-esteem**.

Sexual abuse can have a **ripple effect**, with many family members and people close to the family being affected (e.g. the child's siblings, grandparents, cousins, family friends).

It is important to remember that sometimes the **natural support system** around the young person (their family, school and friends) can be enough to help them recover. Children **may not show any** of the above, or only for a brief time.

Children **may not realise the significance** of the events until later childhood. They may become distressed several years after the event, such as when they start to learn about sexual development and relationships in adolescence.

Sexual harm can occur between **siblings** and this can be particularly difficult for parents, who love both children and have to balance both their needs.

### 3. Common worries of parents whose children have been sexually abused

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#### **“I should have been able to recognise a potential abuser”**

It is important to remember that sexual harm can happen to **anyone’s child** – however caring, protective, or well-informed parents are.

There are often no warning signs for parents – in fact, quite the opposite: perpetrators are extremely skilled manipulators of children, parents, professionals, and organisations. Yet parents are often consumed with guilt that they ‘should have noticed’. This is an entirely normal reaction.

#### **“How can I trust anyone with my child again?”**

The uncomfortable truth is that sex offenders can be any age, background or profession. As a parent, you have an important role in detecting potential abuse and supporting your child if they are abused. Trust your instincts and avoid someone having unsupervised contact with your child if you are unsure.

#### **“Might my child go on to hurt other children?”**

The significant majority of children who have experienced sexual abuse do *not* go on to become perpetrators.

A small number may show sexually inappropriate behaviours because they may be responding to their own complex emotions about what happened by acting this out with other children. Seek specialist support if this is of concern, if they do not settle with time, or if they develop into behaviour that is harmful to others.

#### **“Why is my child touching themselves?”**

After abuse children may touch themselves at an earlier age than usual. It may be a way of seeking comfort, so consider other ways to offer comfort and safety. It is important not to make the young person feel criticised or ashamed for this. If the young person only does this in private, it is usually best to ignore the behaviour. Seek advice if it is very frequent, if the child is making themselves sore, if they are very young, or the young person does not understand the need for privacy.

#### **“Will my child be affected for their whole life?”**

It is important to remember that many young people will overcome what has happened through the support of their friends and family, and will heal naturally with time, safety and love. However, some things may remain difficult for them in the future, depending on the circumstances of the abuse. Many services exist to help support young people with this, and to help them improve their life and wellbeing.



## 4. Common worries of young people who have been sexually abused

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There are a number of common beliefs that children may hold after they have experienced abuse:

### **I didn't tell anyone**

- ... It must be my fault.*
- ... There's something wrong with me.*
- ... I am worthless.*

### **Bad things happened to me**

- ... So I must be disgusting*
- ... I am worthless*

### **It went on for a long time**

- ... So why didn't I stop it?*
- ... This means it must be my fault because I didn't stop it*

### **It didn't just happen once**

- ... So I must be a magnet for it*
- ... There must be something wrong with me*

These beliefs will most likely have been cemented by what we know abusers tell their victims:

- It's your fault
- I'm doing this because you're making me/because you want it to happen
- You're over-reacting
- This isn't abuse
- No one will believe you
- Implicit messages that this is normal (if this is all the child has ever known)

These messages become 'internalised' by the young person and affect their self-esteem and view of themselves. The messages can be particularly strong if the abuser has a dual role (e.g. is a care-giver or family member).

## 5. What can I do to help my child?

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### Remember...

Most affected children will, in time, fully enjoy friendships, fun and family life again, and reach their potential.

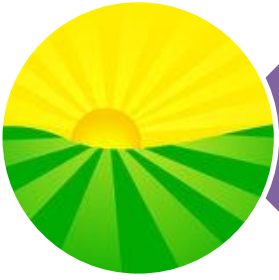
You are working with services because you want to do the best to for your child(ren), and to support them.

Children have the best chance of recovery if:  
*Their parents believe and support them, and they feel safe.*

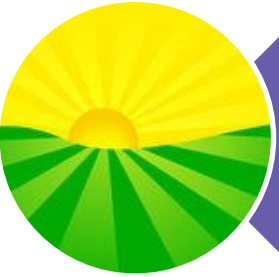
### You can also...

- Try to encourage a broad range of friendships within & out of school.
- Keep an eye out for bullying or unhelpful relationships.
- Talk openly about what makes a healthy or unhealthy relationship.
- Encourage activities that were previously enjoyed – or new ones.
- Be really clear and consistent on boundaries and communicate the reason why.
- Learn about normal sexual behaviour for your child's age and development.
- Lead by example in taking time to relax through activities and friendships, and seeking help if you need it.
- Be available. Show that it's ok to talk about it, but don't force a discussion.
- Speak to family and friends so they can take a similar approach.
- Encourage openness about what has happened within the family (in an age-appropriate way and if it is safe to do so).
- Be prepared to have conversations about what happened – even if they are difficult.
- Try to ensure that your actions and emotional expression match your words when interacting with your child.

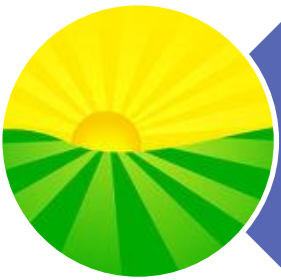
## Messages children need to hear:



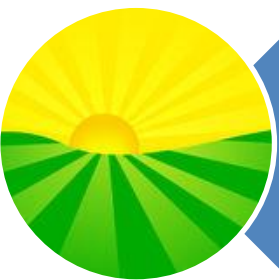
*You're not going crazy/going to go crazy*



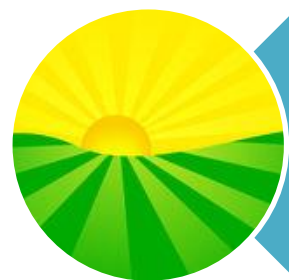
*There's nothing wrong with you as a person, but there was something wrong with what happened to you.*



*You can and will recover, even if life is different to before.*



*I accept you, whatever has happened.*



*What happened was not your fault.*

## 6. Thinking about the other children in the family

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As well as the child who has experienced direct abuse, the events may have an impact on their siblings.

Commonly, we see that siblings may:

- Get less parental attention.
- Feel they aren't thought about enough.
- Feel parents worry too much/are overprotective.
- Go out less than other children.
- Worry about parents/sibling.
- Worry about their own safety.

Because of this, it is possible that their behaviour may change and/or their mental health and wellbeing can deteriorate.

**Helpful strategies** to counter this might be:

- Trying to balance your time as fairly as you can (not necessarily evenly).
- Ensure that siblings who seem 'ok' still have plenty of attention and age-appropriate opportunities.
- Balance need for privacy with avoiding children feeling there are 'secrets' they don't know about.
- Be open if you or your child is having a difficult patch, and this is likely to impact on their sibling.

## 7. Thinking about yourself

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It is natural for you to have your own reactions to what has happened. It is normal to feel anger with the perpetrator, disgust at the event, or to struggle with conflicting feelings.

During this difficult time, many parents believe that they need to “stay strong and carry on”. However, we would always encourage parents to do this by making sure that they are taking good care of themselves.

**Looking after yourself is important to help you process your own responses to what has happened, and to be in the best position for supporting your child.** Also, managing your emotions healthily can help show your child how to manage theirs.

You know what is best for you, but below are some suggestions that may start you off:

- **Daily routine:**  
Try to keep as close as possible to your usual family routine, getting a good amount of sleep and eating regular meals.
- **Activity:**  
You might feel you don't have time or motivation, but investing an hour in meeting friends or doing some exercise can help stabilise your mood and improve your energy levels.
- **Reducing the negatives:**  
Some people find that talking things over with a trusted friend\*, or writing in a diary can help settle their negative thoughts and feelings.  
*\*If there are court proceedings, check who you are allowed to discuss the case with beforehand.*
- **Increasing the positives:**  
It can be easy to only focus on what is bad or difficult. Try to remember your strengths and abilities, and those of your child. Open up old photo albums, or cook a favourite meal. Plan enjoyable family activities into your diary so there are things to look forward to.
- **Having your own support:**  
Take up offers of practical support from friends and family and consider whether you want to talk about what has happened to a professional, separately from your child's own professional support.

## 8. What next...?

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Throughout this booklet, we have described some of the normal and natural responses to traumatic events. Please do not feel concerned if your child is displaying a response that is not described above: trauma responses are different for every person, and it is not possible to include everything here.

In many cases, you and your child(ren) will be able to overcome these difficulties with the help of your support system, like family and friends, and may not need professional help.

However, if things feel unmanageable, if they persist, or you are concerned, there are places you can find extra support:

- **GP**  
Your GP can offer support, or make referrals to other services.
- **TalkingSpace PLUS**  
Offers support for anxiety and low mood in adults. You can self-refer via internet or phone.  
www.talkingspaceplus.org.uk                      01865 901222
- **Childline**  
www.childline.org.uk                                      0800 1111
- **YoungMinds**  
www.youngminds.org.uk                                      0808 802 5544
- **“Eyes Open to Sexual Abuse: What Every Parent Needs to Know”**  
By Dr Nina Burrowes.                                      www.ninaburrowes.com

**If your child is having thoughts of suicide, is harming themselves, putting themselves in danger, or you have any other concerns about their mental health, contact your GP or NHS 111.**

**In an emergency, call out of hours GP, 999 or attend A&E.**

There are also a number of services designed to support young people and families who have been affected by sexual harm:



**Horizon** is a part of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) in Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. It aims to support staff working with children and families affected by sexual harm, and may work with the family and young person directly too. Horizon covers Oxfordshire.



**SAFE!** is an independent charity which offers support and 1-to-1 counselling for children, young people, and families affected by crime and sexual harm. SAFE! covers the Thames Valley.

*Both Horizon and SAFE! run parent groups, as it can be helpful to meet other parents facing similar challenges.*

**CAHBS** (Child and Adolescent Harmful Behaviour Service) is a specialist service which is part of CAMHS in Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. CAHBS helps children address sexually inappropriate behaviours which have harmed or have the potential to harm others.

**CAMHS teams** in North, Central, and South Oxfordshire work with children experiencing mental health difficulties, including those relating to experiences of sexual harm or traumatic events.

**Your GP can make a referral to these services for you.**

Additionally, SAFE! accept self-referrals:

[www.safeproject.org.uk](http://www.safeproject.org.uk)

0800 1337938

# Notes

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