



# How to protect children from sexual abuse

Booklet for parents and caregivers



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## I. Why should we learn as much as possible about the problem of child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is widespread among boys and girls and has been identified to have harmful consequences on the children's emotional and physical development. Unlike common belief, the perpetrator is most often a person that the child knows, e.g. relative or family friend. Though it might seem difficult to talk about child sexual abuse, it is very important for a child's caregiver and/or parent to be informed about the issue. Given that a few children tell an adult about an incident of abuse at the time of the incident, it is adults' responsibility to protect children. Therefore, being able to recognize perpetrators' patterns, signs in the child's behaviour and body that may be alarming, having skills and tools to discuss sexual abuse with children and knowing how to take action if the abuse occur - is essential.

This booklet is meant to help adult effectively protect children and support them. It focuses mainly on the types of situations and signals that should raise our concern, sources for obtaining advice and support, and places where cases of sexual abuse should be reported.

### What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse is a sexual activity that exploits a child, where the perpetrator has age, physical or intellectual advantage over their victim.

It can be committed by an adult, but also by other children usually older than the victim. Among children, some forms of sexual behaviours may be a type of play or expression of sexuality, not abuse. In the following chapters of this you will find information that will help you establish if the sexual behaviours in the given situation can be deemed abuse.

Child sexual abuse involves touching and non-touching activity.

### Sexual behaviours with physical contact

- touching the child's genitalia (penis, testicles, vulva, breasts or anus) for sexual pleasure or other reasons, unconnected to caring for the child
- forcing the child to touch someone else's genitalia or to playing sexual „games“
- forcing the child to masturbate
- penetration – putting objects or body parts (e.g. fingers, tongue or penis) in the child's vulva, vagina, mouth or anus.

### Sexual behaviours without physical contact

- encouraging the child to watch or listen to sexual acts – in reality or showing pornographic materials
- showing own or another person's genitalia to the child
- stripping the child of clothes, unconnected to tending for the child
- taking photographs of the child in sexual poses
- talking to the child about sexual content that goes beyond sexual education<sup>1</sup>

*Undertaking sexual activities towards children by adults, i.e. sexual abused, is criminal activity, according to the European law.*

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<sup>1</sup> You can learn more from Lucy Faithful Foundation's brochure "Stop it Now! What we need to know to protect our children: [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

## II. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse

### Who abuses children?

It is impossible to establish a typical perpetrator of sexual abuse. Such people do not differ in appearance from others. They can come from an array of social strata and from any profession. Sometimes they occupy influential positions, giving appearance of respectable members of the society. They may sexually abuse their own children or other children they know; they may initiate sexual contacts with child strangers.

They are family members or friends, neighbours or babysitters or holding other positions that allows them contact with children. They can be men and women too.

Children often experience ambivalent feelings in reaction to sexual abuse, where the perpetrator is someone they know and trust, as their caretaker. Not always do they realise that what they are experiencing is abuse. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse are often seen as pleasant, warm-hearted and caring towards children. This helps them build close relations with children and abuse them without ever being suspected or uncovered.

It is hard to believe that someone we know – and like – can be a perpetrator of child sexual abuse. However, since it is a viable possibility, we should know what to look for in order to protect our children.

**Remember:** In about 80% cases the child knows the perpetrator!

### Why do people sexually abuse children?

According to the previous section, it is impossible to establish a typical perpetrator's profile, therefore the reasons and motivations that lead them to sexually abuse a child are also diverse. However, there is a widespread believe that perpetrators of child sexual abuse suffer from a mental disorder and that they cannot be accountable for their actions.

By contrast, research shows that one of the main motivations to abuse is the desire of feeling powerful and in control, which becomes evident during the seduction or child grooming process, with the manipulation of children's mind and feelings. For some abusers, this feeling of power might compensate a low self-esteem or difficulties in establishing healthy relationships with adults. However, others might abuse children despite of being in a parallel adult relationship. In some cases, abusers show a low ability to empathize with children and some may even justify their actions by saying that they were offering them the love and attention they were demanding.

Some abusers are "paedophiles", which means that they have a sexual disorder and feel sexually attracted by children. Nonetheless, it is important to note that having this attraction it is not an excuse for their behaviour, as not all people with "paedophiles" tendencies abuse children. Also, we need to keep in mind that not all the perpetrators of child sexual abuse have this "paedophile" attraction.

There are other factors that can contribute to disinhibit the self-control mechanisms and cross the social and moral boundaries to sexually abuse children. Alcohol or drug misuse might be a way of deactivating the influence of these boundaries to facilitate the abuse. Other abusers may allege having been themselves victims of abuse during their childhood.

Even if this might be true, it is important to note that the vast majority of victims of child sexual abuse do not become perpetrators, so there is not a direct cause-effect relationship.

Whatever the reason to sexually abuse a child, none of them can be used as a mean to justify the perpetrator. The experience of child sexual abuse is often traumatic for the child and might have an impact on their development.

## How do the perpetrators operate?

The perpetrators of child sexual abuse often go to great lengths to get close to children and gain their trust. They may put a lot of pressure on children to keep the abuse a secret<sup>2</sup>.

### **CHOOSING THE VICTIM**

The perpetrators may choose only girls or only boys, or children of both sexes, they can prefer children of a certain age group or be a threat to children of all ages. They may favour one child with a lot of attention or shower him/her with pleasant surprises to create opportunity for abuse. In some cases, sexually abused children are treated by their abusers with extreme strictness and presented in a very bad light, so that nobody believes the child if he/she discloses abuse.

### **GROOMING**

Grooming is a process of the perpetrator building a relation with the child, with the intention of sexually abusing the child. Sometimes, sexual abuse of a child is preceded by a long spell of preparations. With time, behaviours that initially seem like a normal way of showing a child affection (e.g. hugging), may grow into behaviours of sexual character. Some perpetrators don't groom children at all, but abuse them without building any relation.

The perpetrators can try grooming children in any and every situation where they come into contact with children: in the family, during physical activity, in music/sports/religious education class, on the Internet or a cell phone

### **BECOMING PART OF THE FAMILY AND BEFRIENDING THE CHILD**

Sometimes, a perpetrator will build a close relation with the child's family – through friendship or marriage – befriend a trouble-burdened parent who doesn't fare well raising their child. Single parents raising children might be especially at risk here. The perpetrator may offer help, e.g. by forming an intimate relation with the child's mother or caretaker and supporting her financially to become a part of the family and move into the child's home. Next, the perpetrator will work on a close relationship with the child (or children) that he wants to sexually abuse.

### **KEEPING IT SECRET**

Sexual abuse almost exclusively takes place in secrecy. The remaining members of the family – including the other parent, if one is the perpetrator – usually don't even suspect that something's not right. The child often feels lost, doesn't know whom to tell or how to do it. In order to keep the abuse a secret, the perpetrator may use the child's natural feelings of fear, shame or guilt connected to what is happening; he/she will often impose silence on the child using blackmail, threats or punishments. Sometimes the perpetrator will bribe the child, or convince him/her that what is happening is absolutely normal.

Perpetrators often persuade the child that he/she is somehow responsible for abuse.

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<sup>2</sup> David Finkelhor & Sharon Araji (2010) Explanations of pedophilia: A four factor model, The Journal of Sex Research, 22:2, 145-161, DOI: [10.1080/00224498609551297](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498609551297)

## How can you tell that someone wants to sexually abuse a child?

There is no clear answer to this question, but parents should carefully consider every person who pays a lot of attention to their child, e.g.:

- showers the child with presents, toys or small gifts
- invites the child to excursions and summer holidays
- seeks opportunities to stay with the child alone

You should always check people who will come in contact with your child without supervision. It is good to access as much information as possible on the caretakers and other people who will be asked to take care of the child, or who offer doing it on their own accord. A parent can always ask the management of your kindergarten or care facility how they verify their personnel and volunteers, and what steps they take to ensure safety to the children under their care.

Remember, bonding and building relationship with your child should be something you do every day. If you know how he/she behaves normally it will be easier for you to recognise any change. Talk with your child, ask for his/her opinions and encourage him/her to voice his/her will. If you notice your child isolating or the child tells you he/she doesn't want to stay or spend time with a certain person, it might be a sign that this person wants to, or is harming your child.

**Being a parent is a challenge. Do your best not to miss anything.**

### III. Symptoms and consequences of child sexual abuse

Children may react to sexual abuse in various ways – this depends on their age, individual traits or the experience itself. The only certain indicators of sexual abuse are: pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and traces of semen in the vagina or anus. Factors that could be associated with sexual abuse could be stressful events in a child's life, such as parents' divorce, death of a member of the family, of a friend or beloved animal, school problems, etc. However, the co-existence of such symptoms in a child should draw a parent's or caretaker's attention and urge him/her to take a closer look at the situation by asking for further information.

#### Alarming signs in child's behaviour that may indicate sexual abuse

A child who experiences sexual abuse may display the following symptoms:

- begin to avert staying alone with one of the family members or close family friends
- shows unexpected fear of a certain adult or doesn't want to contact him/her
- tries to tell about the abuse in an indirect way – by using hints and clues (such as saying that he/she has been asked to keep a secret; asking restless questions about the family falling apart; or investigating whether dad can really be taken away)
- describes behaviours of an adult that indicate that this person is trying to seduce that child in order to sexually abuse him/her
- seems to be down and withdrawn, complains about physical problems that have no medical justification
- has sleep problems, nightmares
- begins to be aggressive and/or presents self-harming behaviour
- shows health problems that indicate sexual abuse – pain in the vulva/anus region
- doesn't want to go to school or suddenly loses the ability to concentrate and begins to have problems with learning
- has better marks at school
- bedwetting or soiling
- begins to behave aggressively
- loses an appetite
- develop low self-esteem
- doesn't want to play/spend time/socialise with peers
- shows atypical sexual behaviours – masturbates in public, uses new adult-like words for sexual activities or private body parts, shows unexpected adult knowledge for sex

The level of symptoms such as: anxiety, depression, signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, school problems, learning difficulties, autodestructive behaviours or psychosomatic symptoms in sexually abused children varies.

Older kids show more symptoms than younger, and the character of these symptoms is different in boys and in girls. The number and intensity of symptoms depends on the abuse itself – how it unraveled and who was the perpetrator (penetration, violence, frequency of

sexual contacts and their duration). More symptoms show in children who got no support from their caretakers or people they trust.

## **Long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse**

The level to which sexual abuse – in the form of anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms, school problems, autodestructive behaviours or somatic symptoms – manifests in children who experienced it may vary. Generally, in older children more symptoms manifest than in younger, and their character is different in boys and girls. The amount and intensity of the consequences depends also on the type of experienced sexual abuse, i.e. with/without penetration, use of force, frequency and duration of the abuse.

The intensity of the manifestations depends also on the relation between the perpetrator and the child. It is also known that more manifestations appear in children who haven't received support from their caregivers after disclosing the abuse or in cases where the caregivers actually denied that any abuse actually happened.

It is worth remembering that many children, due to receiving support from parents or caregivers or in therapy, and/or their resilience capacity, don't face long term consequences of sexual abuse.

## IV. When children abuse children

Older children and teenagers can also be perpetrators of child sexual abuse, although it is often hard to differentiate between abuse or natural sexual exploration<sup>3</sup>. Some sexual behaviours are normal for children of different age groups, but there are certain signals that should raise your attention should you spot them during your child's games that might involve sexual behaviour.

Here's what you should look for:

**Age:**

*Is one of the playing children significantly older than the other?*

**Status:**

*Is one of the playing children in a privileged position in this relation – e.g. is a guardian, a teenage club leader or an informal "king of the street"?*

**Abilities:**

*Is one of the playing children superior in terms of intellectual, emotional or physical capabilities? Is the potential victim physically or intellectually disabled.*

**Power:**

*Is one of the playing children threatening/trying to bribe or physically forcing the other one?*

If your answer to any of these question was positive, then the observed sexual activity may be, in fact, sexual abuse.



Contact a psychologist and discuss this situation that raises your concern (the one disclosed by a child and those noticed by you or other adults). Remember that this is something you can do regardless of whether you are certain that this is, in fact, sexual abuse – this contact will either allay your doubts or support your suspicions, it will allow for helping both children – the victim and the perpetrator.

## What sexual behaviours are normal in children?

Sexuality is an integral aspect of every human being, regardless of age. In the bracket below you will find an unclosed list of sexuality displays that are normal in children.

### Ages 0-3 (infancy and post-infancy)

Common:

- Children learn to distinguish themselves and discover their bodies – they touch it and investigate how it works

<sup>3</sup> You can learn more from Lucy Faithful Foundation's brochure "Stop it Now! What we need to know to protect our children: [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

### **Ages 3-6 (kindergarten)**

Common:

- Questions connected to pregnancy, the roles of mother and father in conceiving and giving birth to a child, anatomy of the sexes, especially the differences in built between girls and boys and children and adults.
- First childhood infatuations.
- Displaying one's nakedness, lack of the feeling of shame in this regard.
- Children show each other their private parts and touch them to investigate (playing "doctor" or "mam and dad" etc.)<sup>4</sup>

Occasional:

- Masturbating at home and in public places

### **Ages 7-11 (primary school)**

Common:

- Children strongly identify with their sex, they learn the behaviours characteristic to it.

Occasional:

- Playing games with children their own age that involve sexual behaviour

### **Ages 12-16 (puberty)**

Common:

- Questions regarding sexual customs, making decisions regarding relationships.
- Masturbating in private.
- Experiments with peers – kissing with open mouth, petting, touching private parts, peeping. Frequent infatuations.

To learn more read the NCTSN's brochure: [Sexual Development and Behavior in Children](#)

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<sup>4</sup> Only if the other child approves and only as a form of anatomy learning etc.

## V. Child sexual abuse on the Internet

The development of the Internet has broadened communication possibilities and access to information. At the same time it has equipped perpetrators in new ways of reaching out to possible victims.

Children and youth spend a vast amount of their free time on the Internet. They undertake various activities – connect with others, play games, search for answers that preoccupy them. During these activities, they are at risk of coming across harmful content, entering into dangerous communications, falling victims to cyberbullying – which all can disturb their psychosexual development and may lead to sexual abuse.

In many cases, parents are unaware of their child's online activity. They don't protect him/her because they don't know what kind of dangers await children on the Internet. The fact that a young person stays indoors puts on a false premise of safety. Unfortunately, if in the course of surfing through the Internet, a child has no guidance from adults, they can become victims of a variety of threats and dangers.

### Dangerous contacts – child grooming on the Internet

Grooming - seducing children online – is an Internet-born relationship between a child and an adult, whose goal is to lure, seduce and then sexually abuse the child. Sexologists describe such behaviours of adults as typical for people with paedophilic tendencies.

Seducing a child on the Internet, the perpetrator can seek a chance to meet the child in reality and sexually abuse him/her or use the child for creating child pornography. Although grooming doesn't always conclude with a real-life contact with the victim, it is always harmful towards the young person. According to the therapists, typical consequences of Internet-based seduction of a child match those of post-sexual abuse trauma.

Children are especially at risk of entering into dangerous contacts while using chat forums, online social platforms such as FB, Instagram, etc, also via online games, where young people reveal personal information that can be used by the perpetrator.

New technologies make it easier for perpetrators to build a close, intimate relationship with a child without the parents' knowledge. Contact with perpetrator can take the form of an emotional relationship in which the perpetrator assumes the role of a boy / girl and strives to arouse in the child feelings of falling in love, or a mentoring relationship in which the perpetrator plays the role of a person full of understanding, supportive and willing to teach the child. The process of child grooming online is a complex phenomenon - the duration, intensity of contact and the way it proceeds depends both on the personality and needs of the perpetrator as well as on the needs and behaviour of the victim. In order to achieve his goal, the perpetrator builds a close relationship and emotional bond with the child, using various techniques of manipulation and in many cases: falsifying his/her identity, e.g. lying about age etc.

## Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is requesting, sending or publishing via the Internet and/or smart phones content and materials that are meant to harm and expose together a non-consenting person. Sometimes such behaviours have also sexual connotation. Young Internet users often go unaware of how seriously they can harm someone. They sometimes attack peers using vulgar content with sexual connotations, they laugh at their colleagues' sexuality, create photomontages, share abusive videos. They may "just for laughs" send each other links to pornographic websites. A victim of these behaviours does not suffer any physical injuries but they can become for her/him the source of traumatic experience and a skewed view of him/herself in the future. The harm to children who are exposed to harmful pornographic content, vulgarising sex-related topics or the mocking of sexuality, may in the future manifest itself as emotional struggles, distorted perception of themselves, a false image of the human sexual life and – as a consequence – disrupt their sexual development.

## Pornography

Pornography on the Internet, including child pornography, is a highly harmful content that a child can come across online. Pornography that lacks a security mechanism (a filter/disclaimer stating that the content is intended exclusively for adults) is illegal content. Child pornography is a serious crime. Producing, retaining and distributing of child pornography is against the law. Pornographic materials that children may come across can be harmful because:

- Contact with pornographic content distorts child's psychosexual development and can have negative impact on the child's perception of his/her own body and encourage deviant behaviours.
- They make the world seem like an incomprehensible and dangerous place, and prevent the child from feeling safe
- They can trigger negative emotions, stress, excessive excitement
- They can shape untrue convictions about the world.

Children can be presented with pornographic content but they can also be engaged into its production. Despite of the very strict laws on fighting against CSAM (child sexual abuse materials) and international collaboration in this area, according to the estimates the number of such material online increases. In 2004 the number of child sexual abuse files reviewed by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (US) were 450 000, while in 2015 it has grown to 25 million files (Thorn)

Sexting is an alarming trend among teenagers and a very dangerous phenomenon, that is sending each other multimedia containing nudity. The main factors that determine this behaviour are typical for age of adolescence desire to entertain, the beginning fascination with sex, interest in the opposite sex, lack of experience, curiosity or shyness. The consequences of this phenomenon can be very serious. Repeatedly sent to a friend, the photo can be used by him and published online in order to joke, ridicule or revenge after broke up with girlfriend or boyfriend. This kind of situations are also frequent cases of blackmail in which the recipient of intimate images threatens their disclosure an publication on the internet, trying to extort money or other sexual content from the victim (sextortion).

## How to prevent child sexual abuse on the Internet?

First of all, it is crucial to realise that a child who uses the Internet and all of the child's activities are the parent's responsibility. It is the parent who is responsible for controlling what content his/her child watches and publishes, and what activities the child engages into online. There are multiple security measures that a parent can use to raise the safety of his/her child on the Internet. There are filtering programmes available together with operating systems, or independently. However, even with the use of these programmes, the key here is to educate the child on the rules for safe Internet use and the dangers he/she may encounter online.

It is important to establish a good contact with the child, so that he/she feels support and is not afraid to talk about things he/she thinks difficult or important. Be proactive – talk to your child about sexuality so you'll be sure what information your child receives and it will encourage your child to ask you instead of the internet. The situation where a child asks his/her parents about topics from the sexuality sphere is far more safe and beneficial than the child seeking answers alone on the Internet. In a situation where a child may be maintaining online contacts that bear a resemblance to grooming, the parents should take a great interest. Such cases can be reported to local organizations.<sup>5</sup>

### REMEMBER

- **Set rules for using the Internet with your child**
- **Make sure only positive and safe content is available**
- **Talk to your child about his/her experiences online**
- **Configure safety settings of your device**
- **Install a parental guidance programs**

To learn more read Lucy Faithfull Foundation's Brochure: [The Internet and children...What's the problem?](#)

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<sup>5</sup> The list of the organizations can be found at the webpage of the [Better Internet for Kids core service platform](#)

## VI. Can I keep my child safe?

Help your child acquire proper and age-appropriate knowledge on sexuality, his/her own body and healthy sexual behaviours. Talking about these subjects can seem difficult but it will play the key role in keeping your child safe from sexual abuse.

Teach your child 5 simple rules<sup>6</sup>:

- P** – Privates are private
- A** – Always remember your body belongs to you
- N** – No means no
- T** – Tell a secret that upsets you
- S** – Speak up, someone can help

Read more about the [Underwear rules](#)

Make sure that the information you are relating to your child is positive – children should take pride in their bodies, not be ashamed of them. They should also be very much aware that their bodies are their own and that nobody should be able to touch them if they don't want it. Tell your child that he/she has the right to refuse if something seems inappropriate or scary. Emphasise that he/she should always, without any doubts, tell you or some other trusted adult about things that the child found dangerous or was scared by. Explain the difference between good and bad secrets. Help your child understand that while it is good to hold to yourself plans of surprising someone, it is not so with secrets that make him/her sad, ashamed or anxious.

Talk to your child about sexuality. Children begin to gather information related to sex from their peers, as soon as they go to kindergarten or school. This information is often extremely inexact and expressed in a vulgar language. That's why it would be advisable for you to go through this topic with your child first. Use occasions that arise in your daily life: bath time, the view of a pregnant woman, a naked person spotted by chance on TV, spontaneous questions that children ask – these are all great conversation starters for basic sexual education. Talking to a younger child may prove easier than with an older one, especially at the verge of adolescence. It is extremely important that you yourself know what sexual behaviours are appropriate and normal for different age groups.

When talking with your child about sexuality try not to focus solely on risks and dangers. Speak about love, intimacy and the feeling of closeness that should be a part of this sphere. Prepare to this conversation. Talking about sexuality is an absolutely normal thing but in many people it triggers the feeling of shame or embarrassment. It is therefore important that you prepare beforehand: think through what image of sexuality and values related to it you want to relate to your child. Think what words you're going to use and teach to your child – refer to professional reads (online, in libraries and bookstores you will find good books dedicated to this topic; ask advice from a doctor, teacher or some other specialist working with children, call 800 100 100 Line for parents and professionals concerned about children's safety).

Build an open and trust-based relation with your child from the very first years of his/her life. Always listen attentively to your child's fears. When teaching your child that his/her body is his/her own you too have to obey this rule. Don't force your child to any type of touch if unwanted (e.g. hugging your relatives during family meetings).

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<sup>6</sup> Based on NSPCC Underwear rule <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/>

Never use corporal punishment – they teach your child that an adult can violate his/her body!

### **Important!**

While teaching your child how to avoid dangers never forget that you are responsible for his/her safety – not the child. Even the best prepared child may be defenceless against the cunning of adults and complication of dangers. Keep an eye on the adults that come into contact with your child. Inform him/her that there's always toll-free, anonymous help provided by the counsellors of the childline operated in your country<sup>7</sup>.

Children who've experienced sexual abuse often feel isolated, they think they can't trust anybody with what happened to them. They love their parents and close relatives but they are anxious about how they'd react; they are ashamed; they want to protect their loved ones from learning things that could ruin their family life. Disclosing abuse is especially difficult if the perpetrator is someone in the family. In such situations an anonymous, unknown and sympathetic person can help the child fight those fears and support him/her in choosing the best way to deal with this difficult situation.

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<sup>7</sup> [List of the 183 child helplines from 143 countries](#) can be found on the webpage of the Child Helpline International.

## VII. When a child has been sexually abused...

Children seek a range of support when they disclose sexual abuse. Understanding what children want from their disclosures is important if recipients of disclosure are to act in a way that protects, but respects, children's wishes and does not make things worse for them.

The most frequent reasons for young people who disclose sexual abuse are<sup>8</sup>:

- To stop the abuse
- Seeking emotional support
- Uncertain, need to tell
- To protect others
- To seek justice
- Response to prompt
- To inform
- To test the waters
- Unplanned, unknown

Tell your child what you will do next. Let your child know that you will do your best to protect and support him or her. Let your child know that you won't leave him or her alone with the offender again. Tell your child that you will talk to people who can help. With an older child, you can specifically mention that you will contact the police and that he or she will only talk to a judge in a friendly questioning room.

### Then, take action:

#### **STEP 1:** Report the abuse

If you know that a child has been sexually abused you must report it. *You can call your local police precinct, prosecutor's office or the family court where the crime has been committed. You can write the court with request for inquiry into the child's circumstances, or ask a professional working in the area of helping children victims of abuse, a pedagogue, court officer, etc. If you're the parent you can take your child to see a doctor or a psychologist who are obliged by law to report all cases of sexual abuse.*

#### **STEP 2:** Seek help and appropriate resources for yourself and your child.

### How can I help a child to disclose the abuse?

You may be shocked and puzzled. You may not understand well what the child is talking about. Finally – you can think it's your fault that you didn't protect the child. These thoughts and emotions can block you and make the disclosure harder for the child. Sometimes an inappropriate reaction can lead to the retraction/withdrawal of the child.

### Try to do your best to help the child disclose.

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<sup>8</sup> To learn more read the NSPCC report: [No one noticed, no one cared](#)



Sit down/crouch down - try to minimize the physical distance between you and the child, but keep a space between the two of you, try not to intimidate the child. Offer your presence, but not physical contact.



Make sure that no one will interfere with your conversation. Close the doors, shut down the phone or TV etc.



Try to understand what is happening. Patiently, in a soft voice ask an open question:

*"Can you tell me what is going on?"*



No matter what the child tells you – stay calm. Repeat the child's words and encourage further disclosure by saying:

*"Tell me more"*

*"What happened next?"*

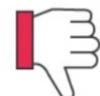
*"And then?"*

*"Go on, continue"*

*"Thank you for trusting me"*



Remember not to force the child to give many details about the abuse. He/she might need time, be ashamed or frightened. Your need to understand the situation may block the disclosure.



Don't blame the child if the abuse was a consequence of him/her disregarding your words – e.g. your child left home without permission. Don't ask questions such as "Why didn't you run away immediately?" or "Why didn't you tell me earlier?" – these suggest that the child has not behaved as should, and that he/she is to blame as well.



Don't react uncontrollably but don't pretend that nothing's happened and it's better to forget the whole thing. Don't show impatience, don't create an atmosphere of great misery and suffering.



Don't make promises you cannot keep, e.g. that you won't tell anyone about the abuse. Assure the child that you'll only share the information with the people who will help to stop the abuse.

**Make sure that after the disclosure a child knows that:**

- It is good that he/she told you about the abuse
- You are not mad at him/her, that the child is not getting into trouble because of the disclosure
- You believe him/her
- It's not his/her fault
- The perpetrator is the person responsible for the situation (the one that should be blamed for) and what happened is against the law
- You will take steps to protect him/her, stop the violence
- You are and will be there for him/her – than a child can benefit from your presence, support, talk to you about everything he/she recall, experience, feel etc..

After the child discloses the abuse you can feel lost, especially if the perpetrator is one of the family members. You may need help in dealing with very strong and conflicting emotions caused by the disclosed abuse, such as shock, anger, disbelief, guilt and fear. Seek out professional help by contacting a helpline for parents operating in your country, the Child Ombudsman's Office or local organizations and institutions that are providing help in such cases.

## About

This brochure was developed within the project "*BREAKING THE SILENCE TOGETHER. Academic success for all by tackling child sexual abuse in primary schools of Europe*", implemented by the Consortium of 5 European organizations specialized in child sexual abuse, child wellbeing and educational management:

Fundació Vicki Bernadet	Spain	<a href="https://www.fbernadet.org/es/">https://www.fbernadet.org/es/</a>
The Institute of Child Health	Greece	<a href="http://www.ich-mhsw.gr/en">http://www.ich-mhsw.gr/en</a>
Hazissa. Prävention sexualisierter Gewalt	Austria	<a href="http://www.hazissa.at">http://www.hazissa.at</a>
European School Heads Association	Netherlands	<a href="http://www.esha.org/">http://www.esha.org/</a>
Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę	Poland	<a href="http://fdds.pl/">http://fdds.pl/</a>

The project provides you with 5 different tools specifically oriented to meet the expectations and needs of the different target groups within the educational community:

- Tool 1: Report "Learning from experience". An analysis of former successful child sexual abuse prevention programs with key success factors.
- Tool 2: Community prevention program. A tool for school principals to lead the implementation of the program within their school.
- Tool 3: Teachers' manual. A tool for teachers with recommendations and activities to help children understand, prevent and protect themselves from abusive relations.
- Tool 4: Toolkit for children and families, with strategies and recommendations to work at home.
- Tool 5: A raising awareness material for the civil society, with key messages regarding the prevention and protection from child sexual abuse.

To learn more about the project visit the webpage: [www.preventingchildsexualabuse.eu](http://www.preventingchildsexualabuse.eu)



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