

Learning Together: Staff Briefing

Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment



This briefing is aimed at anyone working with children and families in North Somerset. It summarises what a recent learning review ('Child B') and national findings tell us about risk factors and learning for improved practice around understanding and responding to child sexual abuse. It provides key findings, recommendations and links to guidance.

The definition of Child Sexual Abuse can be found in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018: Sexual Abuse '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.'

What is child sexual abuse in the family environment?

'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. dad, uncle, stepdad) or less familiar (e.g. family friend, babysitter)' Children's Commissioner, 2015:6

Child Sexual Abuse: National Facts and Statistics

- 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused
- 1 in 3 children sexually abused by an adult did not tell anyone
- Over 90% of abused children were abused by someone they know
- Disabled children are over 3 times more likely to be abused than non-disabled children. (NSPCC)
- Two thirds of child sexual abuse takes place within the family environment or the close circle around it
- Children often do not recognise that they have been abused until they are older
- Only one in eight children in England who are sexually abused come to the attention of statutory authorities. (Children's Commissioner).

Key Messages

A need for **open, curious and enquiring minds** to the need to safeguard children from child sexual abuse.

The difficulties in assessing risk that recognise the **grooming cycle, models of manipulation, coercion, control and power** often challenge professionals' skills and thinking.

Intra familial sexual abuse of children is further complicated by **dynamics of the family, secrecy, shame and guilt**.

Investing time in understanding the **complexity of child sexual abuse and resources to provide solutions** is essential to ensure that the **multi-agency** workforce in North Somerset is skilled to detect.

Multi-agency responses to **prevention, protection and promotion** of wellbeing and health need to be underpinned by an awareness and ability to acknowledge the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse is often all too readily reliant on verbal disclosure from children and young people. **Children communicate their abuse in different ways** and we need to ensure we are open to these by demonstrating that we also understand the barriers they may face to disclosure. We **should not rely solely on verbal disclosures**.

Learning Themes

Communication. How we communicate with families and children, how and when we should/must communicate across agencies. Our use of language and the potentials for assumptions based on our interpretation of information as opposed to analysis of facts and description prevented an opportunity to safeguard Child B.

Child's voice and the absence of their voice is apparent and often sadly noted within many SCRs and learning reviews. Our skills and confidence in being able to communicate specifically with younger children so we accurately seek to understand their lived experience, wishes and feelings in order to safeguard and support them.

Risk of "**Fixed thinking**" and limited curiosity/openness to a range of issues. Professionals' confidence and competence in responding to signs of grooming and safeguarding children from child sexual abuse.

Agencies understanding of **Working Together** and the **NSSCB threshold document**. A lack of confidence in knowing how and when to share information and work collaboratively to assess and plan support to safeguard children.

Complexity of child sexual abuse. In particular intra familiar sexual abuse where identification is heavily relied on disclosures by a child as opposed to family and professionals spotting the signs of grooming.

Multi-agency working, developing a culture of working together to assess the needs and safety of children where concerns have been raised about sexual abuse.

Next steps

Multi-agency themed audit around child sexual abuse in the family environment.

Purpose:

- To sample the experiences of children and young people who are at risk of, or subject to, child sexual abuse in the family environment. (Joint Targeted Area Inspection Guidance)
- To evaluate how effectively current multi-agency practice protects children where concerns have been raised that sexual abuse may be occurring within a family.

Further reading and useful links

- The [South West Child Protection Procedures](#) provides further reading, information and guidance about sexual abuse
- The [NSPCC](#) provides useful information and guidance for professionals working with children who have been sexually abused
- [Protecting Children from Harm, Children's Commissioner](#)
- [Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: The Role of Schools. Children's Commissioner](#)