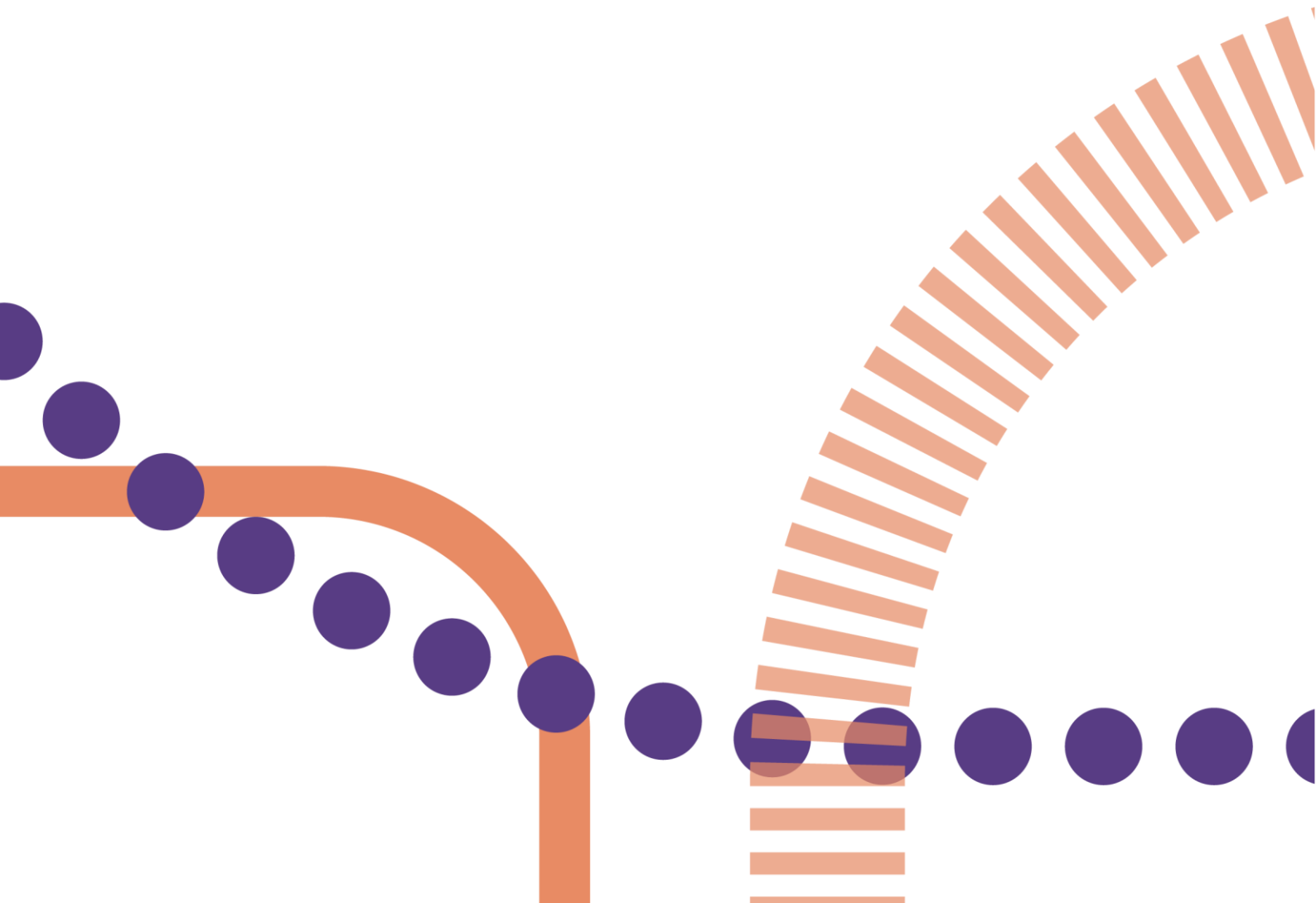


Child sexual abuse

Talking to children about child sexual abuse

March 2026



Introduction

The national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (the Panel) published a [national review](#) into child sexual abuse within the family environment in November 2024.

One of the key findings was that practitioners working with children and families have not been equipped with the knowledge, skills and practical guidance to identify and respond confidently when there are concerns of child sexual abuse in the family environment. Therefore, this briefing paper aims to set out useful information for multi-agency practitioners when speaking to children about child sexual abuse.

Who is this document for?

Multi-agency practitioners, managers and front-line professionals working in universal services such as schools, health services, police and early years settings, and practitioners in specialist safeguarding and child protection roles (including fostering and adoption).

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to support you in feeling more confident and prepared when talking to children about sexual abuse. You can use it to reflect on your current practice, guide team discussions, and help you identify any barriers that might prevent you from initiating these conversations. The key messages, examples, and reflective questions offer practical prompts to help you think about how to create safe opportunities for children to share their experiences, how to talk openly and clearly, and how to respond in a way that helps children feel heard and supported.

Why is it important for children and young people?

Children often struggle to talk about sexual abuse, and many will only talk if a trusted adult notices something is wrong and asks them about it. When practitioners feel confident to start these conversations, children are more likely to feel safe enough to speak, and less likely to be left coping alone. By using this resource, you can play a vital part in reducing the silence that surrounds child sexual abuse, helping children feel believed, protected, and supported at a time when they need it most.

What is the evidence base?

The Panel's national review included:

- Analysis of 136 rapid reviews, 40 related SCRs and LCSPRs, and one thematic review relating to child sexual abuse in the family environment received by the Panel between June 2018 and November 2023.

- 10 online reflective group discussions with 107 practitioners in 9 local safeguarding partnerships who had been involved in 10 of these reviews.
- One-to-one interviews with 2 of the children at the heart of these reviews and 5 people who had been convicted for sexually abusing children in these reviews.
- Reflective discussions involving experts by experience, practitioners and senior leaders from a range of agencies including policing, probation, children's social care, universal health and specialist health services.
- A review of recent research and practice guidance, summarising what is known about child sexual abuse in the family environment and the response to it.

Many of the issues identified have been highlighted in national studies and inspections over a number of years, as well as in our reflective discussions with stakeholders.

Key facts and figures

The review's analysis looked at 193 children who had been sexually abused. In 72% of the reviews, there was evidence that children had told someone about the abuse, sometimes on multiple occasions, although it was not always clear who they had told.

When this information was clear, it seemed that:

- 26 children had told a family member
- 12 had told a friend (either a peer or an adult family friend)
- 10 had told a residential worker or foster carer
- 9 had told a teacher or nursery worker
- 4 had told a health professional (such as hospital staff, or a therapist)
- 3 had told a social worker or student social worker

Common issues

- Children are far more likely to show us in their behaviour, than tell us in words what is happening to them. Overwhelmingly, practitioners rely on children to verbally report their abuse before taking action when they should be responding to the other signs and indicators of sexual abuse. Children are not being given opportunities to communicate what is happening to them and are sometimes not believed when they do tell.
- There appears to be uncertainties about what can and cannot be said to children which have dominated practice for many years, leading to a culture of fear and silence.
- Practitioners have been led to believe that they need children to approach them to speak about sexual abuse rather than proactively talking to children when they have concerns that a child might be being sexually abused, either because the child was

displaying signs of possible abuse or because there was someone in the child's family who presented a sexual risk.

- This meant that opportunities were not provided which could have enabled a child to tell practitioners what was happening. This created a barrier to children speaking about sexual abuse.
- Fear and uncertainty amongst practitioners, regarding talking explicitly about child sexual abuse, prevents practitioners from naming and sharing their concerns.

Hallmarks of promising practice

- Creating opportunities that would enable a child to tell or at least be able to express that something upsetting is happening to them.
- Consulting children and communicating decisions that affected them thus giving back an element of control.
- Safeguarding partnerships should ensure that all practitioners understand and are confident in talking directly to children, and families, about concerns of sexual abuse.
- Ensure conversations adapted for children of different ages, backgrounds, languages, and needs, and the importance of having appropriate resources.
- Safeguarding partners having plans in place to address the impact on children of any decision to end an investigation.
- Interrogating data trends in child sexual abuse as outlined above and questioning whether there may at times be an avoidance and disinclination to name sexual abuse as a concern.
- Ensuring that strategy discussions are held when there are signs and indicators of sexual abuse, even if the child hasn't verbally reported.

Reflective questions and discussion points

These questions and discussion points can be used by multi-agency practitioners to reflect on in team meetings, or to use as a checklist, when responding to incidents of child sexual abuse.

- How confident do you as a practitioner feel in initiating conversations with children about possible sexual abuse?
- What knowledge gaps do you think you have that might prevent you from speaking openly about child sexual abuse?

- Are you confident that your team or safeguarding partnership can address knowledge gaps in a timely manner?
- As a practitioner, do I wait for children to report abuse or create opportunities for them to share?
- What are the barriers that prevent me from being proactive?
- How can we work together to reduce the “culture of fear and silence?”
- What steps can practitioners and managers take to challenge narratives that dismiss children’s reporting?

Questions for leaders

- Do our local policies, guidance and supervision frameworks clearly state that proactive conversations with children are not only permissible but expected when there are signs or risks of sexual abuse?
- Have we created a culture where practitioners feel safe and supported to name sexual abuse openly, without fear of “getting it wrong” or causing harm?
- Are practitioners confident in talking to children of different ages, communication needs, disabilities, and cultural backgrounds about CSA, and do we provide training that builds this confidence?
- Do supervision and team discussions explicitly explore barriers that stop practitioners speaking to children, such as fear, uncertainty, lack of knowledge, or misconceptions about investigative boundaries?
- Do our safeguarding and strategy discussions prioritise what the child has tried to communicate, verbally or non-verbally, and are these attempts documented and acted upon?
- Have we ensured that all relevant staff understand the difference between supportive conversations with children and evidential interviews, and know when and how to escalate to specialist services?
- How do we monitor and assure ourselves that children’s experiences, statement (including partial or indirect ones), and emotional cues are consistently informing decisions, safety planning and next steps?

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel's new learning hub www.childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk, where you can access videos, webinars, podcasts and other content, including the full report: "[I wanted them all to notice](#)".

Visit [the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse](#) (the lead reviewers on behalf of the Panel) for a guide, which gives all people working with children information on what they can do to help children communicate what is happening. It brings together research, practice guidance, and expert input – including from survivors of abuse – to help give professionals the knowledge and confidence to act.

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/practice-resources/communicating-with-children/>

Key messages from Research on [identifying and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse](#).