

# Keeping Children Safe

**Your Right To Ask**

**Information to help  
you keep your child  
safe from sexual abuse.**



West Mercia  
**POLICE**



SERVING - PROTECTING - MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

# Contents

- Introduction
- What is child sexual abuse?
- Who sexually abuses children?
- How does abuse take place?
- What can I look out for?
- What can I do to keep my children safe?
- Further information and organisations that can help

## Introduction

Many people feel that they already hear more than they want to about child sexual abuse and hearing about these crimes, in the media and in the community, can be extremely upsetting.

Often the TV, radio and newspapers cover stories about children who are abused, abducted and even murdered, usually by strangers, but it is important to know that these are not typical crimes. Sexual abuse is more often perpetrated by people who are known to the child. People who abuse children are often very skilled at building trust both with the child and with their parents, carers and friends. Abuse may take place for years with no one being aware of it. The internet can also provide opportunities for adults to make contact with children in order to groom a child for abuse – both online and offline.

The secrecy surrounding child sexual abuse is evident in the fact that only a quarter of children who are sexually abused tell anyone about it at the time. Of these, most tell a family member or friend. Relatively few come to the attention of the police, Children's Services or health professionals.

Most adults want to protect children from such abuse. Recognising the behaviour of people who groom and sexually abuse children is not easy – either because we do not know what to look for or because our suspicions are so disturbing that we push them out of our minds.

You may be concerned about someone who has contact with your child or a child close to you (which could also be via the internet) and it is important that you know the right steps to take to raise your concerns and take the appropriate measures to keep that child safe.

This leaflet is designed to give you practical information to help you understand how abusers and potential abusers operate, how you can identify the signs of grooming and child sexual abuse and what you can do to protect your child or a child close to you from harm.

## What is child sexual abuse?

Child sexual abuse can involve touching and non-touching activity.

Non-touching activity includes:

- showing adult pornography or images of child abuse to a child;
- deliberately exposing an adult's genitals to a child;
- photographing a child in sexual poses;
- encouraging a child to take indecent and inappropriate images of themselves or others;
- encouraging a child to watch or hear sexual acts; and / or
- inappropriately watching a child undress or use the bathroom.

Touching activity includes:

- touching a child's genitals or private parts for sexual pleasure;
- inciting a child to touch themselves sexually;
- making a child touch someone else's genitals, play sexual games or have sex; and/or
- putting objects or body parts inside the child's mouth or body.

## What is child sexual abuse? continued

Child sexual abuse can also occur via the internet. Child sexual offenders can use the internet in a number of ways to abuse children, including:

- contacting children they already know and using the internet to groom that child in secret;
- contacting children unknown to them and grooming them into performing sexual acts via a webcam;
- contacting children unknown to them and grooming them into meeting in the real world to abuse them;
- taking still or moving images of child abuse and sharing these online; or
- downloading and / or sharing indecent images of children (sometimes referred to as child pornography) with other likeminded people online.

## Who sexually abuses children?

More than 8 out of 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser. This means, that sexual abusers are likely to be people we know, and could well be people we care about. Some will seek out employment or voluntary work which brings them into contact with children. Some will hold positions of trust which can help to convince other adults that they are beyond reproach, making it hard for adults to raise their concerns. Even where they have not met, for example, when children have been groomed online, they may feel that they 'know' and trust the abuser.

Some people who abuse children have adult sexual relationships and are not solely sexually interested in children. You cannot tell by looking if someone has a sexual interest in children.

Abusers come from all classes, racial and religious backgrounds and may be heterosexual or homosexual. Whilst it is more common for us to hear about male offenders, women can also sexually abuse children. Some young people are also capable of sexually abusing other children. This is an especially difficult issue to deal with, partly because it is hard for us to think of children doing such things, but also because it is not always easy to tell the difference between normal sexual exploration and abusive behaviour. More information about how to recognise worrying behaviour in children and young people and what to do about it can be obtained from the organisations listed at the back of this booklet.

## How does abuse take place?

### By accessing a child:

People who abuse children often build a relationship with the child and the caring adults who want to protect them. Many are good at making 'friends' with children and with those who are close to them.

Some may befriend parents who are facing difficulties or who are alone. They may offer to babysit or offer support with childcare and other responsibilities. Some seek trusted positions in the community which put them in contact with children, taking up roles in childcare, schools, children's groups and sports teams.

Some visit places such as arcades, playgrounds, parks, swimming baths and around schools where they can get to know children. Some use the internet to contact children – often through chat rooms, social networking sites, interactive gaming sites and other websites and online forums where children go.

Child abduction is very rare and makes up a very small minority of all reported offences.

Whether online or offline, they will exploit any vulnerabilities that a child may have. Of course, simply being young means that children may not yet have the skills to interpret inappropriate adult behaviour and take measures to protect themselves.

## How does abuse take place? continued

### By silencing the child

Once abusers have accessed a child, they will often start grooming not only the child but also the adults around that child in order to make it extremely difficult for the child to either disclose the abuse or for an adult to suspect them.

Giving gifts, encouraging a child to keep secrets, making threats, blackmail, developing a 'special' relationship' and flattery are all grooming techniques that are used by abusers. including those who groom children online.

They may make the child afraid of being hurt physically, but more usually the threat is about what may happen if they tell someone what is going on: for example, the family breaking up or the father going to prison, or simply that they will get into trouble. In order to keep the abuse secret the abuser will often play on the child's fear, embarrassment or guilt about what is happening, perhaps convincing them that no one will believe them if they did tell. Sometimes the abuser will make the child believe that he or she enjoyed the abuse and wanted it to happen. There may be other reasons why a child stays silent and doesn't tell. Very young or disabled children or those with learning difficulties may lack the words or means of communication to let people know what is going on. If a child is being groomed online, there may be additional pressures that an abuser will bring to bear, such as threats that their information, secrets or images will be shared over the internet and with their friends or parents.



## What can I look out for in children?

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for changes in their behaviour, but if we notice a combination of worrying signs it may be time to call for help or advice. Signs to look out for in children include:

- acting out in an inappropriate sexual way with toys or objects;
- using inappropriate, sexualised language;
- nightmares and sleeping problems;
- becoming withdrawn or very clingy;
- personality changes, seeming insecure;
- regressing to younger behaviours, e.g. bedwetting;
- unaccountable fear of particular places or people;
- outbursts of anger;
- changes in eating habits;
- physical signs, such as, unexplained soreness or bruises around the genitals, sexually-transmitted diseases, pregnancy;
- becoming secretive;
- excessive use of the internet; and/or
- receiving gifts that they are unwilling to explain

## What can I look out for in those around children?

There may be cause for concern about the behaviour of an adult or young person if they:

- insist on physical affection such as kissing, hugging or wrestling even when the child clearly does not want it;
- are overly interested in the sexual development of a child or teenager;
- insist on time alone with a child with no interruptions;
- spend most of their spare time with children and have little interest in spending time with people their own age;
- regularly offer to babysit children for free or take children on overnight outings alone;
- buy children expensive gifts or give them money for no apparent reason;
- frequently walk in on children/teenagers in the bathroom;
- refuse to allow a child sufficient privacy or to make their own decisions on personal matters; and/or
- treat a particular child as a favourite, making them feel “special” compared with others in the family.

## What can I do to keep my children safe?

The most important thing you can do is to **be vigilant** around those who have access to your child, in both the physical and the online world, and to keep an open dialogue with your child as this will help them to tell you if they are worried about anything that is happening to them.

**Talk to children and listen** to what they have to say and know what they are doing, where they are going and who they are talking to, including when they are on the internet. People who sexually abuse children rely on secrecy.

If you have young children, you will be more able to control who your child interacts with and spends time with. Help them understand that strangers are people they don't know and this is true for the real, physical world as it is when your child is using the internet.

Encourage your child **not to keep secrets** – a safe relationship between adults and children is one in which secrets are hard to keep; where children would feel able to tell someone even if they hadn't been able to say 'no' to the abuse.

The more difficult we make it for abusers to come between children and parents or carers, the better-protected children will be.

Demonstrate to children that **it is all right to say "no"**. We need to teach children when it is OK to say "no", for example when they do not want to play, or be tickled, hugged or kissed. We also need to help them to understand what is unacceptable behaviour and that they should tell us or another trusted adult if someone is behaving in a way which worries them, even if they were unable to say "no" at the time. Sometimes the abuser is a close family member. When that happens it can be especially painful for the parents or other family members to face and it's even harder for children to say "no" and tell someone.

## What can I do to keep my children safe? continued

**Set and respect family boundaries** - we need to make sure that all members of the family have rights to privacy in dressing, bathing, sleeping and other personal activities. Even young children should be listened to and their preferences respected.

**Set rules around internet use** and help your child to understand that strangers online are still strangers and that they need to keep their personal information private. Help them understand that it is never a good idea to meet someone in the real world who they first met online but, if they do, then they should take a parent or trusted adult with them.

**Take sensible precautions** when choosing childcare and find out as much as possible about babysitters. Do not leave children with anyone you have reservations about. If a child is unhappy about being cared for by a particular adult, talk to the child about the reasons for this.

There are things we can all do to prevent the sexual abuse of children. Sometimes a person outside the child's immediate family has a clearer view of what is going on than those more closely involved. Above anything, if you are worried that someone you know has a sexual interest in a child, **seek help from the Police, Children's Services or from the agencies detailed at the back of this booklet.**

## What can I do, where can I go for help?

The police and Children's Services have joint working arrangements for responding to suspected child sexual abuse. Someone will talk to you about your concerns and may ask for details so the situation can be investigated further. Police officers and social workers are very experienced in this work and will deal sensitively with the child and family.

If you are concerned about an individual's behaviour towards a child they have direct and unsupervised access to, you can approach the police for information about that individual. If there is any information held on that individual that raises concerns about their suitability to be around children, the police may either disclose that information to the parents, carer or guardians of that child and / or help them implement measures to protect that child from possible abuse.

If you are worried about someone's behaviour towards a child, you can

1. Contact your local police
2. Contact your local Children's Services
3. Contact the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline
4. Contact the Stop it Now! Helpline

### 1. Local Police

If a child is in **immediate danger**, call 999. If not, all police forces have other ways in which you can get in touch, including a non-emergency phone number which you will find in a telephone directory or online.

You can get in contact with your local neighbourhood police team. Visit your local police force website for details or go to [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) and search for 'police'.

## What can I do, where can I go for help? continued

### 2. Children's Services

You can also get in touch with your local Children's Services and contact details will be found online or through local telephone directories

### 3. Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre – [www.ceop.police.uk](http://www.ceop.police.uk)

CEOP is the UK's national police agency for dealing with child protection, particularly tackling offenders who use online technology to abuse children. If you are worried about someone's behaviour towards a child online, you can report this at [www.ceop.police.uk](http://www.ceop.police.uk)

### 4. Contact the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline - 0808 800 5000

The NSPCC is the UK's leading charity dedicated to stopping child abuse. You can call their child protection helpline on 0808 800 5000 or via email at [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) (or [talk@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:talk@nspcc.org.uk) if you are emailing from Northern Ireland).

### 5. Stop it Now! UK and Ireland Helpline - 0808 1000 900

This is a **confidential helpline** for adults worried about the sexual behaviour of people they know towards children, including parents and carers worried about the sexual behaviour of their children. The helpline also engages with those worried about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children as well as with professionals needing help with difficult cases. The Helpline operates from 9am-9pm Monday-Thursday and from 9am-7pm on Friday. More information can also be found on [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk).

Child sexual abuse happens in secret and most victims tell no-one. The abuser is usually a family friend, neighbour, a member of the child's family or someone working with children: he or she may be someone we know and love.

“When I was 14 I told my mother that my father was sexually abusing me but she didn't do anything. A year later I told my doctor. He said there was nothing he could do. If somebody had listened and helped me at the time my problems would have been halved. People knew what was happening to me but were too frightened to do anything. People have to feel confident to take action.”

*Adult survivor of child sexual abuse*

“It made it easier for me to tell, knowing there are places where people like my Dad can get help. I told because I wanted him to get help, not just to see him punished.”

*17-year-old woman*

## Local Police Information

**If you think a child is in immediate danger call 999 at any time - your concern will be managed by specialist officers working in West Mercia's Public Protection Unit.**

If you have a more general concern about a new partner, a neighbour or a family friend who is showing too much or unusual interest in a child, you can now ask the police whether they have any convictions for sexual offences against children.

Under the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme, this information can be released by the police to the person best placed to protect that child, where previous convictions exist and there is reason to believe the child is in danger of being harmed.

You can submit a disclosure request to West Mercia Police by letter, phone, through the force website, at a police station or by speaking to a police officer.

Your request will be managed by the force's Public Protection Unit, who will contact you once your request has been recorded on the force's database.

### **Key Contact Details:**

- **Non-emergency Number: 0300 333 3000**
- **West Mercia Police website: [www.westmercia.police.uk](http://www.westmercia.police.uk)**
- **West Mercia Police, Public Protection Unit, Hindlip Hall, PO Box 55, Worcester, WR3 8SP**

To process a request we will require information about you, the child you believe may be at risk and the person you are concerned about.

Policing Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin and Worcestershire