

GUIDANCE NOTES NO:

9.4

FINDING OUT THAT A FAMILY MEMBER WAS ABUSED AS A CHILD

FOR ALL

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The FA
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Finding out your now grown-up son or daughter experienced sexual abuse in their childhood is extremely difficult. Naturally, you'll want to support them while coping with your own intense emotions.

Apart from finding out your child was sexually abused, this article is also relevant to finding out that another close family member was abused. For example, your sibling, partner, parent, grandchild, or a close friend.

DIFFICULT FEELINGS

It's important to say that there's no right or wrong way to feel. Everyone's experience is unique.

You may well feel a rightful anger towards the abuser(s) and anybody who allowed the abuse to happen. You might feel extremely shocked or confused, wondering how on earth it could have happened. Many feel deep pain and grief. Coming to terms with what their child experienced and its effect on their current lives takes time.

You might also feel betrayed – many parents know the person who abused their child and trusted them. You might blame yourself, or worry that others will. It's also not unusual to feel numb or blank, i.e. an absence of feeling.

However you find yourself feeling, take time to listen to yourself. Take things one step at a time. There is reason to be hopeful that over time, things will improve for your child and yourself.

Some of the common questions parents/carers ask themselves are listed below. We then offer some hopefully helpful thoughts in each case.

WHY DIDN'T THEY TELL ME BEFORE?

Most people who have experienced sexual abuse take a long time to tell other people. A large number never tell anyone. Many fears can get in the way, such as:

- how it might affect those they love;
- how it might affect how they're seen by other people;
- how it might affect their own feelings about it all.

Many people worry they might be blamed or disbelieved. Or that talking about it will trigger a chain of events for which they're not ready. There can also be concerns about what the abusive person(s) might do if they find out.

People can also keep it inside for many years because they'd forgotten it happened, or they feel ashamed and embarrassed. Mixed feelings about the abuser often also get in the way. Sometimes it simply feels like there is no 'good time' to talk about it.

WHY DIDN'T I REALISE AT THE TIME?

Many parents blame themselves for not spotting their child was being abused and for not protecting them from it.

With hindsight, it may now be possible to see that something was wrong. If you are blaming yourself, bear in mind:

- People who abuse children are typically very good at 'grooming' everyone who cares about that child. They are experts in convincing people that they are nice, caring people and have the child's best interests at heart. This makes a lot of abuse at the time hard to spot;
- Sometimes people hold onto guilt because deep down it can be easier than admitting to the relative powerlessness they had at the time;
- It's also true that some people turn a blind eye to signs that something isn't right, because they find it too difficult to face and acknowledge.

If your child has thoughts to share, be open and reflect on what they tell you. But, of course, don't force these conversations.

If you feel there were things that you should have done differently, it may be important for your child to hear you say this and say sorry.

For some people, their parents letting go of unnecessary guilt can help lift a burden. Others are helped by their parents showing they're sorry for things they should have done differently. Some people simply find it useful to understand their parents' thinking at the time.

IT SEEMS UNBELIEVABLE – DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?

Many parents find it hard to believe their child went through all that they did.

It can be particularly difficult if the person named as the abuser was someone they trusted or admired.

Some parents wonder if their child is mistaken, lying or exaggerating for some reason.

If you are wondering about these things, bear in mind:

- Many abusers are good at coming across as lovely, friendly, and authoritative people – stereotypes of the loner, ugly paedophile are inaccurate and unhelpful;
- Once an abuser has a child under their control, their abuse can escalate and become frequent, extreme and very cruel;
- Research shows that the impact of abuse is made much worse for people when their feelings and experiences aren't taken seriously;
- Without realising they are doing this, some people minimise what they are hearing to avoid facing the reality, which is too awful or painful.

HOW HAS MY SON OR DAUGHTER BEEN AFFECTED BY THE ABUSE?

Many people find the end of abuse is not the end. They are left with ongoing difficult emotions, such as shame, anger, distress and powerlessness. They can also experience negative feelings about themselves and about other people, such as self-blame and distrust – and memories that keep crashing in. Many turn to drink, drugs or self-harm to cope.

Some people find they are first able to block-out their feelings or memories about the abuse. This is known as 'dissociation'. But this may become more difficult over time. This can mean they are suddenly overwhelmed with abuse-related emotions they didn't know were there.

It's also true that some people won't feel very affected by it. Everyone is different and it may be worth asking your son or daughter how they feel the abuse has affected them – though not everyone will want or feel able to talk about it.

SHOULD I REPORT THE ABUSE TO THE POLICE?

Your child (or family member) may have already reported the abuse to the police. If they have, bear in mind that the criminal justice process is often highly stressful, and they may particularly benefit from your support at this time.

If they have not reported it, and are not inclined to, they will no doubt have good reasons. It's not right for everyone – for some the costs are too high. And bear in mind the fears people often have about speaking out.

If this is the situation, and the abuser(s) might still be alive and not already known to the police for abuse, it might be wise to explore this decision with your son or daughter. That's because children might still be at risk. But avoid placing any pressure.

Sometimes people do not report abuse because they aren't confident about the process. **The Victim and Survivor Reporting Factsheet** from Operation Hydrant might address some of their concerns or questions.

If, after discussing with your child, you are worried that the person who abused your child could still be a danger to children because the abuse is unreported, you may want to report it yourself. You can report to your local police force in person, by telephone (simply dial **101**) or online.

Also bear in mind Crimestoppers where you can report anonymously:

W: **www.crimestoppers-uk.org**

T: **0800 555 111**

A further option is the NSPCC helpline – **0808 800 5000**. This is run by specialist child protection advisors who will pass on concerns to both the police and social services (child protection departments).

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY SON OR DAUGHTER?

Here are a few thoughts:

- Be warm and empathic. Recognise they might have complex feelings about what's happened. But try not to assume what these feelings are;
- Have conversations asking about how they are feeling and doing. Give them space to talk about anything that may be on their mind about the situation. At the same time, don't push to talk if they don't want to;
- Avoid potentially intrusive or pressurising questions about 'what happened'. Focus on understanding how they are feeling now and what they might like from you;
- Recognise your own feelings and think about which of these are helpful to share with your child, and which may be better explored with someone else, like a friend or a counsellor (see below). Bear in mind that getting support for yourself is also supportive of them;
- Avoid treating them as if they are 'different' in any way because of the abuse;
- Take time to notice the strengths they have drawn upon in surviving or in coping with the abuse and related experiences;
- If there are signs that they are struggling, don't be afraid of asking about how they are doing. Help them get the support they would like. It can be helpful to emphasise they should do things at their own pace.

This can help if things are overwhelming.

HOW DO I COPE?

It's really important that you also have the space, time and support you need to process this trauma. This helps you and your son or daughter.

Some helpful tips include:

- There are lots of useful ways of coping and moving forward from trauma, but 'avoidance' can be unhelpful. If we avoid our thoughts and feelings about something traumatic for a long time (though this can be useful initially), it can leave us with problems down the line;
- Talking to someone you trust is often helpful, although again it may not feel right to begin with. This might be close friends or family members; someone who has been through something similar; or a counsellor, therapist or support worker. Bear 'confidentiality' in mind – your child may have a view to whom you do/don't talk to;

- It can be useful to give yourself planned mental space. People often find it helpful to have some 'thinking time' while going for a walk, or listening to music. If you find yourself thinking about it while trying to sleep, it might be good to plan a chunk of time to think about it during the next day instead;
- When you feel something difficult (for example, anger or pain) take time to notice how you feel and express it in a way that helps (for example, talking, writing, or through art, music or poems);
- Think back to how you have coped in previously stressful situations and see whether there might be things that you did then that could help now;
- Take things 'one day at a time'.

HOW CAN I FIND A QUALIFIED COUNSELLOR OR THERAPIST?

If either you or your son or daughter would like therapeutic support, there are several options.

If your child has experienced sports-related abuse, Sporting Chance, a charity providing therapy and support to sportspeople, can provide help and guidance. Sporting Chance's general enquiries number is: **0870 220 0714**.

If your child has reported football-related abuse to the police, the police should also provide them with details of how to access free, local therapy.

If the abuse has not been reported to the police and/or your child has not received any information about free, local therapy, please contact **safeguarding@TheFA.com** for details of the available therapy.

Some local GPs refer people to NHS-funded counselling or therapy if they are suffering from anxiety, depression, stress, post-traumatic stress, or other difficulties. However, what is available varies by area.

See here for a list of organisations that may be able to point you towards other options in your local area. The Survivors' Trust website can also help with this: **https://thesurvivorstrust.org/support-in-your-area/**.



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