



PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

a guide for parents



Introduction

The agencies who have responsibility for the assessment and management of sex offenders in Northern Ireland and who comprise the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee (NISOSMC), first published this short booklet for parents in 2002. Protecting our Children has been widely disseminated and proved so invaluable to parents that it been revised slightly and republished in this smaller handbook format for ease of use.

Protecting our Children sets out important messages about child sexual abuse: who might commit it, advice on keeping children safe and what to look out for. The booklet contains information on sex offenders and explores some common myths that often exist about those who harm children. Multi-agency assessment and risk management procedures are described in a chapter in the back.

We hope that this booklet is helpful in giving parents and carers good practical advice about protecting children.



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Assistant Chief Constable (Criminal Justice Policy)

Chair of the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee which comprises:

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Prison Service

Health and Social Service Boards and Trusts

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Department of Education

Northern Ireland Office

NSPCC Northern Ireland

NEXUS Institute

Child Sexual Abuse

Who might commit it, and how to keep children safe

Who are the abusers?

Different kinds of people sexually abuse children:

- Abusers can be anyone – family members, neighbours, friends, doctors, coaches, youth leaders, clergy, bank managers. They are often respectable people we least suspect.
- Two thirds of victims know their abuser.
- Abusers are hardly ever strangers or odd-looking, scruffy men enticing children away with sweets, but that's the image many people have.
- Abusers come from all classes, professions, racial and religious backgrounds.
- Most known abusers are men, although some women sexually abuse their own children and others. Many people don't believe that women sexually abuse children, which makes it hard for children to tell and be believed if it happens to them.
- Adolescents also abuse children. About one third of reported cases of abuse involve teenage abusers.
- Abusers say they often target single parent families because exhausted mums are especially grateful for help with their children.
- In a research study, KIDSCAPE found that a large number of male sex abusers find victims by offering to baby-sit.

Why do they do it?

How can seemingly kind and even respectable people abuse children? Some know what they are doing is harmful. Others delude themselves to believe they only want to 'love' children.

These abusers see media images of monster abusers and don't recognise themselves. They feel OK because they kid themselves into believing the abuse does not harm, or even that it's good for the child. Sometimes flashes of reality get through and they become depressed. They push guilt away, often blaming others, including the child.

If abuse stays a secret, abusers carry on. If they or someone tells, this can open the door to treatment, positive change and becoming safer citizens. Today there are some effective treatment programmes run by prison and probation services and by voluntary organisations.

How do abusers control children?

**"I look for a child who seems to be lonely or sad or looking for attention. Then I take my time gaining her trust and becoming her friend. In time she will do anything I ask."
– An abuser**

Child abuse is rarely a single incident or event. Naturally all parents fear for their children when something horrible and unforgivable happens. But in order to protect children, we need to know that most abusers form a relationship with a child – a relationship which harms the child and often makes the child feel responsible and unable to tell. Secrecy is the foundation and children are trapped before they know what has happened.

Abusers may:

- be good at making friends with children. They can appear to be kind, trustworthy, caring and helpful. They put on a good act which fools parents and children.
- appear as both nice and nasty. “I can be loving and kind, but if you don’t do what you’re told, you’ll see another side to me.”
- be extremely frightening, using fear, threats and violence to get both adults and children to do what they want.
- live in or join families in order to abuse children.
- look for jobs which put them in contact with children. They work in child care, schools, funfairs, sports or any activities involving children.
- hang around places like arcades, playgrounds, parks and swimming baths to get to know children so they are not seen as strangers.
- offer a combination of gifts, treats, games, outings, money, toys, bribes and threats to children to entrap them. They may threaten physical harm or that the child will lose the love of someone if they don’t do what the abuser wants.

Most abusers try to find out as much as possible about the child and how they can drive a wedge between the child and parent. The more difficult we can make it for them to come between children and protective parents, the safer children will be.

If the abuser is a member of the family, or even a parent, it is especially painful to face and even harder for children to say no and to tell. We all need to be aware that people who abuse children who are close to them may also use the tactics described in this booklet.

Abusers will try to find out:

- What the child most wants – a computer game, a new bike, a day at an amusement park, to learn to be better at football, or how to play the guitar or pass exams, sweets, cigarettes or just someone who will listen to them and give them affection.
- What the child is forbidden to do – smoke, drink, stay out late, watch extra television.
- What the child fears – to be thought weak, to be punished at home, to be lonely, family problems, to be unloved.

The abuser may use this information to get the child to go along with the abuse and to keep it secret.

WARNING SIGNS

Often children cannot tell us directly that they have been abused, but do show signs that may alert us. There may be other reasons for their behaviour, but if you notice a combination of some of these, it could indicate they have been sexually abused:

- **Acting out in an inappropriate sexual way, perhaps with toys or objects**
- **Nightmares, trouble sleeping**
- **Becoming withdrawn or excessively clinging**
- **Seeming to be keeping a secret**
- **Personality changes – becoming insecure**
- **Regressing to younger behaviour such as bedwetting or thumb sucking**
- **Unreasonable fear of certain people or places**

“I’ve talked with all three of my children about never keeping secrets about touching and telling me if anything happens. I’ve also told them I will always love them - no matter what happens and no matter what anyone else may tell them.”

We can teach our children

Children need to know that you will be there for them if they are abused by someone they know. It may help to teach them:

- that no one, even someone they know, should ever ask them to keep touches, hugs or kisses secret.
- it is never the child’s fault if someone does this or abuses them in any way.
- that if anyone touches them in a secret, confusing or frightening way they should tell. This feeling may come before the person tries to abuse them.
- that if something bad does happen to them, they should tell you about it and you will help sort things out.
- that you will not be angry if they tell you even if they think they’ve done something wrong or it involves someone they know or someone in the family.

It is a good idea for us to talk about touching and secrets with our children and to ensure that we are there to listen to their concerns.

How Abusers Keep Children From Telling

Child abusers don't want to be caught and become expert at keeping children quiet. Would-be abusers usually turn away if they see that the relationship between the child and parent is one in which secrets would be hard to keep. The best protection for our children is that they feel they can always tell us anything. It is vital that we know the ways abusers keep children from telling us about abuse. Abusers are expert at using excuses and ploys to keep children confused and silent, such as:

THE ABUSER says..... You're special or talented.
THE CHILD thinks..... He gives me treats and takes me out. He got me in the team.

THE ABUSER says.... Your parents know all about this.
THE CHILD thinks..... Dad/mum told me to be good for the babysitter, doctor, aunt.

THE ABUSER says..... I love you.
THE CHILD thinks.... She's mum and she loves me. She won't hurt me – mums don't.

THE ABUSER says..... Do you want to play.
THE CHILD thinks Yes, please. I love dare games!

THE ABUSER says..... You wanted to play this game.
THE CHILD thinks..... It's my fault.....

THE ABUSER says.... It would kill your mum if she knew.

THE CHILD thinks.... It would....

THE ABUSER says.... I am teaching you what adults do. You're so grown-up.

THE CHILD thinks.... It must be OK if adults do it.

THE ABUSER says.... You are so pretty/handsome that I cannot resist you.

THE CHILD thinks.... I attracted him. It's the way I dress/act.

THE ABUSER says..... You enjoy it.

THE CHILD thinks Well, it sometimes does feel nice. Maybe he's right.

THE ABUSER says.... Here is some money/sweets/bribes.

THE CHILD thinks.... I should not have taken it – now no one can know.

THE ABUSER says..... You will be in big trouble if you tell – you'll be taken away from home.

THE CHILD thinks..... I don't want to be taken away.... I won't tell anyone.

THE ABUSER says..... You could have said "no".

THE CHILD thinks..... Why didn't I?
I'm bad or stupid.

What do I do if I Suspect Abuse?

Children often find it difficult to tell their parents or anyone else about being abused. If you are worried or suspect that your child has been abused, talk to him or her. It may be that there is another reason for their behaviour or unhappiness. If they have been abused, they may not tell you everything all at once. Try not to push them; let them tell in their own time.

Talking to your child:

- Stay calm and be reassuring.
- Listen – do not put words into their mouth.
- Try not to get angry and upset on their behalf.
- Say you are glad that the child told.

What should you do?

It is a very confusing time for parents and children. We don't want to make matters worse by frightening children because we need to be in control for their sake. But we also don't want to make it seem that it doesn't matter by not reacting at all. Having comforted your child and ensured that they are safe and being looked after, you may find a quiet place on your own to:

- ring the police immediately, depending upon the circumstances.
- ring your local Social Services or the NSPCC for advice.

“The nursery I leave my daughter in is excellent. They have an open door policy - parents are always welcome. The staff have been police-checked and they are trained in child care. My little girl loves it there - sometimes she doesn’t want to come home.”

“My teenage son was approached by a man saying he lost his dog in a nearby park. He asked my son to please help him. Fortunately my son said he had to get home and he didn’t go. Later we read that a man had abused another boy in the park after luring him there to help find his dog. If we hadn’t warned our son, it could have been him.”

You may be worried about what might happen if you ring the authorities. Remember that they are concerned to help children. Most studies show that children have been glad of help from police and social services, even if it may have been frightening at first. Depending on what has happened, the police and social services may be involved. This may be the most difficult thing you've ever had to do. But remember that it takes a lot of courage for children to tell about abuse. If nothing happens and no action is taken, children may never feel safe enough to tell us again.

What happens next?

- The police may decide that there is enough evidence to take the case to court and will need to interview your child.
- Whoever the abuser is, even if they are someone in your family or someone you know, it isn't a good idea to confront them. Most abusers will deny anything happened or that it "only happened once" and that it will never happen again. This usually isn't true. Abusers need outside help to stop their behaviour.
- The alleged abuser is likely to be arrested and may be charged.
- You may be worried about what will happen to the abuser if it is someone close to you. For some it is possible to get help to change and live a better life. Telling may be the best thing you did, not only for your child, but for the abuser.
- Get help and support for yourself and your child from your GP, therapist, social services, your religious community and from friends. There are booklets available, such as *Why My Child?* Free from KIDSCAPE.

What can you do help your child?

Children who have been abused may suffer emotional distress and experience behaviour problems or feelings of panic. These may continue on and off for a while. Much will depend on their individual experience. But a loving and safe family plus counselling can help your child recover. Don't forget that you may also need help and support to see you through – phone a helpline (see Where to Get Help) talk to friends or relatives you trust or try getting in touch with other parents in your situation.

“My child's behaviour changed. She cried and clung to me when I left her with the babysitter we had used for several weeks. It turned out the babysitter had started abusing her and told her I wouldn't love her anymore if she told anyone. Poor little thing - she was too scared to speak. Looking back I now see the signs - I wish I'd known before what to watch out for.”

Assessment and Management of Sex Offenders

Sexual Offences Act 2003

Part 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which applies to Northern Ireland, re-enacts with amendments, Part 1 of the Sex Offenders Act 1997, and requires those convicted of sex offences to notify certain personal details to the police within stipulated time periods. The Act also establishes a range of new preventative civil orders intended to protect the public from the risks posed by sex offenders by placing restrictions on the offender's behaviour.

Multi Risk Assessment and Risk Management of Sex Offenders

Using risk assessment/risk management procedures, Area Sex Offender Risk Management Committees, reporting to the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee (NISOSMC), assess the risk that sex offenders pose. If necessary, a risk management plan is devised and arrangements put in place to monitor the offender. Cases of very high risk offenders, are referred to the Strategic Management Committee for consideration.

Agencies represented on the Strategic and Area Committees include:

Police Service of Northern Ireland
Probation Board for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Prison Service
Health and Social Service Boards and Trusts
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
Other relevant agencies with child protection expertise

The Strategic Management Committee will also consider if it is necessary to make information available to sections of the wider community that will help parents to protect their children.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Ring the Police or Social Services, listed in your local directory - or contact your GP.

CHILDLINE 0800 1111 (24 hours)

Telephone counselling and advice service for children and young people in trouble or danger

CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE 02890 245704

Gives advice about law and policy affecting children and young people in Northern Ireland.

KIDSCAPE 0207 730 3300 (10am - 4pm) 2 Grosvenor Gardens, London SW1W 0DH

Offers free child protection leaflets with a SAE and a telephone helpline for parents of bullied children.
www.kidscape.org.uk

NSPCC NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION HELPLINE

If you have concerns about the welfare of a child, please call on Freephone 0808 800 5000

POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND 02890 650222

PARENTS ADVICE CENTRE

Helpline 028 9023 8800
belfast@pachelp.org
www.pachelp.org

NEXUS INSTITUTE

Young Witness Support Scheme NSPCC (NI)

Antrim Courthouse Tel: 02894 487533
Belfast Tel: 02890 240847
Foyle Tel: 02871 266789

Provides information and support to young people and children who may give evidence in criminal courts



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This booklet will be made available in other formats/languages if requested.