



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Department of Community Paediatrics

Supporting Children Who May Have Experienced Sexual Harm

Information for parents and carers



Thank you for bringing your child for medical assessment today. We understand that this is a very difficult time for your child, you and your family, and you may have many questions and concerns.

You may need to meet with lots of professionals and services, and this can sometimes seem overwhelming.

This leaflet has been written to try to help with some of the questions you may have at this time. It contains information about where else you can seek support, both now and in the future.

It is normal to find it difficult to make sense of what has happened with your child. You may have your own grief and shock to manage, as well as your child's. It is important to look after yourself, so you can provide a calming, supportive and safe environment for your child, as best as you can.

If your child has experienced sexual harm, it is important that you continue to give them the following message, through both your words and your actions:



“I love you. What happened is not your fault. I will do everything I can to keep you safe.”

Children will often show their feelings through their behaviour, so be aware that changes in behaviour may be a sign of how your child is coping.

How am I supposed to react?

There is no 'right' reaction. There are many ways in which you might feel like reacting. Some common, normal reactions include:

- **Anger** – You may feel angry at the abuser or even frustrated with your child for not telling you. It's not easy news to hear, but it's important to remember it is not your child's fault.
- **Anxiety** – You might be anxious about responding in the 'right' way to your child, or about existing or future relationships and trusting people, especially if the abuser is someone you know.
- **Fear** – Depending on your family circumstances, you may be afraid that the abuser will find a way to harm your child again, or be concerned about taking care of your family on your own.
- **Sadness** – You may feel sad for your child, your family, or for yourself. It might cause changes in your life, but it is OK to be upset.
- **Shock** – If you had no idea about the harm, you may be very surprised to hear what has happened.
- **Guilt** – It is common for parents to feel guilty that they were unable to protect their child from sexual harm. This is a normal reaction.

Remember that sexual harm can happen to anyone's child, however caring or protective parents are. There are often no warning signs for parents. The people who carry out this kind of abuse are extremely skilled manipulators of parents, professionals and children.

What can I do to help my child?

- Believe your child, as well as supporting them through the process. Don't judge them and try to understand their feelings and behaviour.
- Try to make sure your actions and emotional expression match your words when interacting with your child.
- Be available. Show that it is OK to talk about it, but don't force a discussion.
- Encourage activities that were previously enjoyed, or new ones.
- Remember that siblings may also be affected, even if they have not suffered direct abuse/harm. They will also need your support and understanding.
- Seek professional help early if you are concerned about your child's mental or physical health, or your own.

What can I do to help myself?

Looking after yourself is important, to help you process your own responses to what has happened and to be in the best position for supporting your child.

You know what is best for you, but below are some suggestions:

- **Daily routine:** Try to keep as close as possible to your usual family routine, including getting a good amount of sleep and eating regular meals.
- **Activity:** Doing some exercise can help stabilise your mood and improve your energy levels.
- **Increase the positives:** Remember your own strengths and abilities, and those of your child. Plan enjoyable family activities, so there are things to look forward to.
- **Take up offers of support:** If friends and family offer help, try to accept it. Consider whether you want to talk to a professional separately from your child's own professional support.

Good to know

Your child will have the best chance of recovery if:

- any sexual harm is discovered and stopped
- their parents/carers believe and support them
- they get any additional help they need to support their recovery, if this isn't happening naturally
- they feel safe and are protected from further harm.

Remember!

Most affected children will, in time, fully enjoy friendships, fun and family life again, and reach their potential.

Further help

GP

Your GP can offer support, or make referrals to other services.

Horizon

This is part of CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). It can offer support to staff working with children and families affected by sexual harm, and may work with the family and child directly too.

SAFE

This is an independent charity which offers support and one to one counselling for children, young people and families affected by crime and sexual harm. You can refer yourself or your child to SAFE.

Website: www.safeproject.org.uk

Tel: 0800 133 7938

Email: safe@safeproject.org.uk

Both Horizon and SAFE run parent groups, as it can be helpful to

meet other parents facing similar challenges.

ChildLine

A free, private and confidential support service for children and young people.

Tel: 0800 1111

Website: www.childline.org.uk

Young Minds

Information service for support with wellbeing and mental health.

Tel: 0808 802 5544

Email: www.youngminds.org.uk

Talking Space PLUS

Offers support for adults with anxiety and low mood. You can self-refer via the internet or by phone.

Tel: 01865 901 222

Website: www.talkingspaceplus.org.uk

If you are concerned about the physical or mental health of your child, contact your GP or NHS 111. In an emergency call 999, or go to your nearest Accident and Emergency department.

How to contact us

Community Paediatrics:

Dr

Tel: **01865 231 994**

(9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)

Social worker:

Police:

Other referrals made today:

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

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