



**South Essex  
Rape & Incest  
Crisis Centre**

**Information Pack  
For Mothers  
and Carers**



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# Introduction

South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC) opened in 1984 to provide counselling, advocacy and support to women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and to families, carers, teachers, social workers and any professionals who are supporting children and adolescents.

This introductory pack contains information you may find useful if you think your child is being abused, or if your child has been sexually abused. You may be feeling frightened, bewildered and overwhelmed.

You may be unsure how to help your child, how to talk about the abuse and how to take care of yourself and your own feelings.

Most sexual violence is committed by men known to the women and girls they abuse, however, SERICC acknowledges that boys are abused and that some abusers are women. It is also important to acknowledge that some children are abused by more than one person, sometimes groups of people.

SERICC work with women and girls and have therefore made references to mothers and girls and to male abusers in this pack. We hope that the information in here will be useful to you no matter what your situation is.

SERICC also offers support to partners, family and friends and we also provide information and signposting for male victims. Whether you are a mother, father or carer, we hope you will find reading this pack helpful. Please contact us directly if you have any questions about your specific situation.

Read this pack at your own pace. You may be experiencing a range of feelings – from outrage to despondency, from anger to the deepest of sadness. At the end of the pack there are additional resources and contact numbers as well a number of websites throughout the pack if you would like further information (if you are reading this on line many of the websites will be active at the time of writing).

## What is sexual abuse?

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact including penetrative (eg rape, vaginal rape, anal rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts. They may also include non-contact activities such as, involving children in looking at or in the production of sexual images; watching sexual activities; or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways. (Definition from Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2006<sup>1</sup>)

Sexual abuse can happen to any child regardless of their race, age, and social class, where they live, family income, their physical, mental or learning abilities<sup>2</sup>. It may be one incident or repeated over a number of months or years.

Perpetrators of sexual abuse come from every profession, social background, race, age, ability and cultural and faith background. Sexual abuse, like all abuse, is an abuse of power. Both boys and girls can be sexually abused and some children are sexually abused by women, however, the majority of sexual abuse is perpetrated by men known to the girls & women they abuse.

There are books and information on all the issues raised in this pack and suggested books for parents, girls and boys at the end of this pack.

## Why does it happen?

This is a question everybody asks. There is no easy answer. Research with sex offenders over the years has shown that there have been many excuses. Defendants in court often say they were 'abused as children', 'had an uncontrollable sexual urge', 'were depressed at the time' or other blaming excuses. Sex offenders are often in relationships with adults at the same time as sexually abusing children. It is not 'solely' to do with sex; it is about the misuse of trust and power within unequal relationships.

## When does it happen?

Sexual abuse can happen at any age. It can happen when a child is alone with a trusted adult. It can happen when there are other adults or children present (ie carrying out day-to-day tasks like washing, bathing, putting the child to bed, taking

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/information>

<sup>2</sup> For more information we would suggest <http://www.respond.org.uk> <http://www.voiceuk.org.uk> who are specialist organisations working with children and young people with learning disabilities

them to the toilet or taking them to school or to a friend's house). Most sexual assaults are not one off incidents. Perpetrators will often use opportunities like this to gain the child's trust. These actions are often carefully planned and can go on for a long periods of time - this is called 'grooming'.

## Protecting children

**Protecting children from sexual assault** – Children can be sexually abused in families, institutions and residential places of 'care'. Sexual assault is often 'invisible', not directly talked about as part of education or reported in the media, so many children are left to assume that it is a 'normal' part of their everyday life. Some children believe it is only happening to them or they are told that they are in some way to blame. Children are taught to 'obey' their parents or trusted adults and that they should do as they are told. Equally, children are taught to run away from strangers or 'say no' to strangers that approach them.

Research shows the majority of perpetrators who sexually abuse are familiar adults and these messages to children can be confusing. However telling them not to accept lifts from strangers, not to speak or to get into cars with 'strange men' will not necessarily protect them from sexual assault or make them responsible for sexual assault if they do any of these things.

We can give children some power by teaching them to say 'no' to anyone who wants to do something to them they do not feel comfortable with. Children need specific prevention education that helps them understand that they have a right to say who touches their body. Anti-bullying work in schools rarely focuses on sexual abuse and sexual bullying.

### Who are abusers?

- Abusers may seem perfectly respectable and 'nice', but they can be extremely clever at manipulating their way into an adult's confidence so you might trust them alone with your child/ren.
- Abusers do not necessarily look dirty, weird, creepy or act suspiciously - they often behave like everyone else and look 'normal'.
- Abusers come from all social classes, professions, ethnic and faith backgrounds.
- The majority of abusers are men known to the family
- Abusers can be really good at making friends with children. They may offer to teach games, sports or how to play a musical instrument. They may suggest outings, or give gifts, toys, money or treats or offer to babysit, suggestions you instinctively feel are inappropriate.

## Impact and Symptoms

**How Children Tell** – There can be physical and emotional signs of sexual abuse. There are those that are evident at the time of the abuse or in the days, weeks or months following sexual assault or a series of assaults. Some of these can be identified around the time of assault. A child who has been sexually assaulted may show some of the following (some are medical while others are emotional and behavioural).

### Medical symptoms include:

- Venereal infection
- Vaginal or rectal bleeding
- Vaginal or rectal itching and soreness
- Recurrent urinary tract problems
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Teenage pregnancy

These are signs in a child or teenager which should never be ignored or left as unexplained.

### Disclosure (telling):

Emotional or behavioural responses may include many signs of distress that parents often note in their children for a variety of reasons. However, children do not generally say *“My father sexually abused me six times”* all children tell in their own way. They might tell in vague terms eg *“I don’t like Uncle... anymore”*, or *“I don’t want grandad... to look after me tomorrow”*. For a child, *“Don’t make me go to Uncle... anymore”* is a very clear message, but for an adult this might not come across as clear.

Some children think they will be met with disbelief, ridiculed or ignored *“I told my Nan and she said she never wanted to hear talk like that again”*. If a child does tell them, often families can carry on as if nothing happened. Children may often receive the message that it is ‘too horrible’ for words, which means to them they are ‘too horrible’. Sometimes children may think they have told, but have not been understood by the person they are telling; For example; *“Mr... wears funny underwear”*, *“I don’t like it when he tickles me”*.

Some children do not tell with words and instead messages can be in their behaviour. The following are the most common reactions, signs, and types of behaviour, but of course children can demonstrate them for all sorts of reasons. However, sexual assault can be one of the main causes that can be overlooked. All or any of these can happen after sexual assault or during the time the child is being assaulted and there are many ways of indicating something traumatic has happened and it may not be that this child is necessarily 'being difficult'.

### For example;

- Children may be reluctant to go to a particular place or person, especially if the feared person is someone with authority over the child.
- They may also become fearful of anyone touching them. Although this *can* be a healthy sign of self-protection it more likely to be about the fear of being touched or not wanting to be touched at all.
- They may suddenly change their play habits.
- They may become reluctant to use a favourite play place or do not want to be with other children.
- They may wet the bed or are terrified to go to sleep and wake up crying from nightmares.
- They do not want to be left alone.
- They stop eating.
- They develop illnesses and want to go to the doctor; they don't want to go the doctor.
- They have trouble at school or show an inability to concentrate, or they are reluctant to go to school or cannot wait to get there.
- They may cry hysterically every time a particular baby-sitter or relative comes round.
- Older children can become depressed, develop eating difficulties, abuse alcohol and drugs, get into trouble with the authorities or engage in self-harming behaviour.

This list is not exhaustive. Often children are simply trying to get someone to pay attention, but their behaviour can be misinterpreted. They are labelled as 'attention seeking', 'bad' or 'stupid'. These labels make them feel even more hopeless, "*perhaps they are right*", "*I'm no good*", "*No wonder he does that to me*".

Children's attempts to tell are full of difficulties. Children and young people think that they will be disbelieved and even punished for telling about their experiences and



many are. Many abusers threaten and terrorise the child emotionally and physically for example - *“You will go into care, away from mummy if you tell”, or “I’ll go to prison and it will be your fault the family breaks up and you will be sent away”.*

Adults in positions of trust cannot always be relied upon to be sympathetic. Many children fear that once they do disclose, all resulting actions will be taken out of their hands. Older children cannot be certain of how others will respond or if their experiences and decisions will be respected.

One common fear is that children who tell will be held responsible or accused of breaking up the family. Children may fear they will be blamed and that something bad will happen to them, other people, pets or anything that they love. For example their parents may split up, their father imprisoned or that they will be taken into care. Even small children are aware of the possibility of losing their mother/parent, home, family, money, stability etc.

Children receive messages about learning to respect and obey adults because they are told - *“grown-ups know best and make the rules”, “be nice to...”, “people like good girls who are nice and polite”, “it’s rude not to kiss him”, and “give your ..... a hug”.* They may believe the abuser when they say *“everything will be okay”* or they give promises not to tell, which then they are too afraid to break eg *“he told me it was our special secret”, “he told me not to tell”, “he said all daddies do this and it was okay”, “If he did it to me then he said he wouldn’t touch my sister”.*

A child may try to express affection in inappropriate ways like ‘French kissing’. She may show an unusual interest in the genitals of other people, or animals, or she may offer to take her clothes off or have sexual knowledge beyond her age group. Children do not have explicit sexual knowledge to enable them to talk in detail about sexual practices unless they have experienced it.

It can be very hard to know what to think or what to do. Some people think the child has observed this behaviour from adults, older brothers, sisters, parents, television or DVDs and that it is behaviour they should be told off for. With older girls the behaviour might not be so age inappropriate. It may seem like she is ‘flirting’ or exploring her sexuality.

Another response is to think the child is not inhibited about their body, other people’s bodies, or that they are acting in a way to be ‘cute’ or ‘entertaining’. Both

responses overlook the more likely possibility that the child has been sexually assaulted and has learned this behaviour from an adult or an older child which will probably be reinforced as she gets older by 'rewards'. Children can be taught by adults to behave in 'sexual ways' and the child can see any reaction to this behaviour as affection. Their behaviour is often labelled as 'seductive'.

*"I'm glad when daddy lets me stay up late with him. All I have to do is sit still while he takes photographs of me"* – (Elly Danica, 'Don't, a Woman's Word' – see booklist).

Usually, when children do tell about sexual assault it is some period of time since the assault took place. This is particularly true if the abuser is in the family. She may not tell for years. Children who feel there is no one to trust and that sharing leads to harm and not helping, may feel it is not safe to tell. This means they learn shame, secrecy and silence.

## **Feelings**

### **Anger**

Children and young people may experience a lot of anger and may take it out on their parents or care-givers; perhaps because they find it difficult to direct their anger at the offender. It is often easier and safer to direct it at people they think are not going to hurt them or walk away from them. In counselling the young person can learn that the feeling of anger is normal and that there are constructive ways of expressing anger.

### **Depression**

Older children and adolescents may also experience depression and thoughts of suicide. They may harm themselves, engage in risk-taking behaviour, substance abuse, or isolate themselves from their family and friends.

### **Sexualised behaviour**

Children who have been abused may act out inappropriate sexual behaviour that they have learnt from the abuse. They may request stimulation from adults or children or act out sexualised play with dolls.

### **Understanding children's reactions**

It is vitally important to accept your child's reaction to the assault. Pretending it did not happen or that it does not really matter can reinforce their feelings of guilt and powerlessness. Encouraging children and young people to develop their own confidence and feelings of self-worth can help them overcome their experience.

**Your child needs you...** more than anything else. Your child needs support, comfort and love, now and in the future. Children and young people cope best when their family and environment is calm, caring and accepting.

## **What if my child has been sexually abused?**

As with all important issues, sexual abuse and its effects are not things that you can bring up once and then be finished with. Talking with your child or children is part of the on-going process of openness and sharing.

Learning that your child, (in your care, or whom you know) has been abused is devastating. It can be overwhelming and bring up all sorts of feelings. It can be the loss of the ability to think clearly or logically. It may remind you of something that happened to you as a child, a lot of pain and hurt. You may feel guilty for not knowing it was going on and not protecting her.

How you find out about the abuse will greatly affect your reaction and the eventual outcome. If the man who has abused your child is a friend, relative, boyfriend or husband then you may be confused. If you are told in front of your partner, friend, or relative they may deny it totally. Men who choose to sexually abuse children are skilled in making convincing statements and using manipulative ways - telling the child for example, that their mother would not believe them, or that their mother knows all about it.

The abuser has a vested interest in separating a mother and child. This can be achieved in many ways; eg the great 'secret' between him and the child or by belittling the mother in the child's presence. In this way communication between mother and child can be broken down.

The decisions to be made, after the sexual assault of a child or young person, are difficult ones. There are no right answers. The most important thing is to support your child emotionally. Talking to a specialist sexual violence counsellor can help you work through your feelings - for example, anger, guilt, or grief - and determine what to do next.

If you believe a child or young person is at risk of harm and you decide to contact the police or social services then they have a legal duty to assess the situation based on the information you provide. This will also happen if you tell a teacher, any medical service or a sexual assault referral centre (SARC).

## Supporting your child and your response

Go slowly and do not ask for too much too quickly. Keep the focus on the child's needs and then you will be better able to listen to the child. Children are very perceptive and they will sense if you are angry, distracted or in a crisis. Reassure her that you understand how difficult it was to tell you and that you are glad that she told you. If she has decided to tell someone else before telling you – then you need to respect her choices and decisions. Children have their own reasons which are good ones at the time and will make sense from their point of view.

Let her tell you without immediately contacting the person she is naming. You also need space and time to take on the information without the abuser present. Allow for yourself to feel shock, anger, and disbelief as various past events may also unfold in your mind. If you choose to approach the abuser you may need support.

When a child first starts talking about the abuse she can be helped by gentle questions eg *'Can you tell me what happened? Use your own words; go slowly, it's okay'*. It is important not to force or pressurise the child to talk. They will tell you in their own time and this is one area where a child can and should be allowed to take control. This will be the beginning of her learning to take control of her life and to deal with the feelings of powerlessness often created by sexual abuse.

It is a bad idea to start rushing into action as soon as you are told, unless your child is at risk. More often than not the abuse will have been going on for some time. Ask questions that help show how the child is viewing the situation, for example; *'How were you able to tell?'* rather than, *'Why didn't you tell me before'* as many children feel guilty for not saying something sooner. If the child stays with different households of two parents or is in a complex family structure or in residential care, or boarding school then she may have additional difficulties finding someone to tell and knowing someone who will believe her.

However, young children do not make up stories about sexual abuse. Young children may have difficulty describing in clear vocabulary what has happened precisely, complete with exact time and dates because they may be too young to have developed these skills. This is not a cause for disbelief – **believe what the child has told you.**

Most children will take on the guilt for being abused and for causing the crisis in the family, ie for telling. Children may feel they did something wrong and have caused a lot of trouble. It is important to repeat the message that **you know it is not their fault**, by making it clear the fault lies with the perpetrator. Angry threats about what should happen ie him going to prison, or you want to kill him etc, - may cause a child to feel guilty about telling.

Go slowly. It is important not to assume or guess how your child feels. It is a good idea to keep your feelings and reactions separate from those of your child. The child's feelings may be completely different from your own. For example, your child may be worried that the perpetrator is going to be really angry at her for telling, or that she will be taken into care. It can be very hard to focus on what your child needs when dealing with your own emotions at the same time. Saying something like, 'Yes I'm angry, but not at you', helps the child know that she is not the cause of your anger and that it is okay get angry too.

Most abuse is committed by a family member or trusted friend of the family and so the child will probably have mixed feelings, including loyalty and guilt. The child may also be angry and want something to happen to him and not understand why there are no effects from having disclosed. Your anger might well lead you into thinking that the perpetrator must be caught and punished. It is a good idea not to make promises and threats at this point. Reassuring the child or children that they are okay, safe and will be protected by you to the best of your abilities, may help the child feel some action is being taken.

It is important not to promise that certain things are going to happen, such as being punished by the court. The child's trust in adults has already been betrayed, so promising action that may or may not occur can continue that sense of betrayal.

Once you have provided care and support and have found out what happened it is then possible to decide rationally how best to move forward. The decisions you need to make about reporting to the police and medical care are extremely difficult. There are no 'right answers' and each situation is individual. Your child may need medical care and attention. This may be obtained from a children's department in a hospital, another medical service or Sexual Assault Referral Centre. You can contact South Essex Rape & Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC), to find out about our service and other organisations that can help you and your child.

It is important that your child should be included as much as possible in the decision making process but they should not be asked to make decisions which are beyond their ability. They need to be allowed as much control as is reasonable without being overwhelmed by having to take responsibility for very difficult decisions. Explain clearly and gently what action is or is not being intended and be aware of your child's response.

## **What happens after disclosure?**

The length of time it may take for children to recover will depend on many things. For example how long she was abused, whether the man was trusted, how close he was to the child and what he said and did to her – all of these are factors. In addition, reactions around belief, support, protection, and comforting from those close to her and talking about the abuse are also vital.

### **Talking**

In the past parents were advised not to encourage the child to talk about the sexual assault(s). It had been thought that by not talking about it the child would forget.

Talking will help to work through feelings and gain control and understanding of what has happened. Children can express themselves in words, tears, with drawings or toys and it is important that they are allowed to do so and that the adults they tell do not react in embarrassed, punishing or disbelieving ways. By talking you can help them express and sort out their feelings of fear, anger, humiliation, guilt, shame, confusion, or embarrassment. You can then reassure them they are believed, loved and protected.

So for example you can tell them; *“I understand you don't want to talk about it now, but if it begins to worry you or you're thinking about it a lot then it's really important you tell me because I want to help”*.

It is important your child is allowed to talk about the abuse if and when she needs/wants to. This may not necessarily take the form of a direct approach but might be done by them putting out a signal that she wants to talk about it. For example, if she sees the abuser or she mentions him, then it may be a way to talk about how she feels about him now. Give her your full attention and listen to what you are being told no matter how difficult the timing of this may be. You may only get one opportunity to hear her experience.

Telling someone else about the assault(s) may give new information about how your child is feeling. It will give her the opportunity to test another adult's response and whose fault she thinks it is; for example, "*Oh no don't tell aunt... she won't love me anymore*" may be a sign that more reassurance is needed. You cannot control everyone's reactions and it is important to check this out before promising your child that the person being told will respond in a caring, supportive way or talking to people about the assault in front of the child.

No matter how careful you are in choosing people to tell you will probably have a mix of positive and disappointing experiences. People respond to sexual abuse in their own way influenced by their attitudes, experiences and personal history. They may well bring or offer a set of assumptions or biases to the assault that has nothing to do with your child or you. They may challenge or minimise the experience, blame you, blame the child, want to rush out and kill the abuser, or cannot believe that their son, brother, father, friend 'could do such a thing'. Children and adults who have been sexually abused are often made to feel guilty for what has happened – by family, friends or the man who sexually assaulted her and society in general.

When you begin to share what has happened you may be disappointed or angered by some of the ignorant and insensitive responses you may receive. However, you may also be surprised by the people who respond more positively than you had expected.

### **Questions**

The child may have many questions about the abuse. She may be concerned about what will happen to the abuser, especially if he was known to her. It is important to let a child know this and to find out what she is worried about rather than trying to predict what will happen. It is also important to let her know that she is not responsible for what will happen to him.

A child may ask how or why someone would assault a child. Parents and others may also wonder the same thing. Children may be okay with the explanation that the person is 'sick' or has a 'problem', or they may want more explanation if they are older, or if they knew the offender well enough to say that he didn't seem 'sick', 'mad' or 'bad'.

Men who choose to sexually abuse children usually deny their responsibility by saying things such as;

- “We didn’t have intercourse so it’s OK”
- “It only happened a couple of times. I couldn’t help myself”
- “Having sex is the only way I show my love and affection”
- “She’s not my real daughter”

*(Quotes from ‘Treating Child Sex Offender and Victims’, 1998)*

It also comes as no surprise, because of these attitudes, that the intention is to put the blame on anyone other than the abuser (who commits the crime) or to try to justify it eg “If she was going to learn how to do it, she needed to learn from someone who knew what he was doing” or the blame lies with the rest of the family, or implies that the mother has somehow agreed to it, eg “My wife doesn’t love me”, or the ‘provocative’ daughter – “She climbed in bed with me, naked, and jumped on me”, “She didn’t seem to mind it so much”. Girls are often accused of manipulation by the abuser, because the abuser can then sexually assault the child for as long as she is unable to speak or as long as she is not heard.

The most important point to communicate is that no matter what the abuser or anyone else thinks it was not the child’s fault.

## Getting back to normal

Encourage, but do not force your child to continue with their lifestyle according to how well they are able to do so. Your child may express the stress from the abuse by wanting to stay away from school. The specific circumstances of the assault may affect this and you may decide to move home and/or change your child’s school.

As with talking, she can be encouraged but not forced to do ‘normal’ things like regularly going to school and so on. This will give her a sense of security and reassurance that her life will not be disrupted forever. Recovery time is needed with love, acceptance and support.

It is important to understand that a child may seem back to ‘normal’ and then will have setbacks where she starts remembering specific things, having nightmares or refuses to leave you or your home. It is important not to ignore difficult or inappropriate behaviour. You will need to discuss and decide what behaviour is acceptable and appropriate to your child’s age and stages of development. There are no right and wrong answers for a parent / carer and you will need to separate out



which behaviours are negotiable and which are not. Reassuring your child that it is often their behaviour you do not like, not them a person.

The impact will be expressed emotionally, physically and behaviourally. So for example, during the first few days or weeks the child may be very quiet, scared and un-talkative or have trouble concentrating. She may feel sore, or feel sick, or ill with stomach aches. She may have sleeping difficulties, experience mood swings, or want to sleep in your bed. She may bed wet or experience changes in her appetite - all are common responses.

One day you may realise that nothing has been mentioned about the abuse for a few days or weeks. It is not uncommon that sometimes children who have not spoken for months or years about the abuse will suddenly start to begin to get angry, frightened or show feelings about what happened. They may start to become worried about what their friends will think about them, about how they would react if their friends knew or they may seem unable to get it out of their mind, just about the time everything seems to be returning to 'normal'. This is a natural and 'normal' progression. The setbacks can be hard, painful and difficult to face. After the initial crisis is past there can be a stage when the child seems to have forgotten about everything and does not want to be reminded of the abuse in anyway.

Children who are recovering are able to set better boundaries for themselves and are able to express anger or assert their will. They are able to talk about the abuse not being their fault and that the blame lies with the abuser. Things like starting to feel comfortable with friends or family, or being able to go into new situations is a start to her taking control of her own life.

If you feel this is not happening at all and you have done all you can, you may decide that more specialised help and support is needed.

Many children can block out what has happened in order to cope. This type of mental blocking means that placing the abuse or series of assaults out of the mind so much that you do not actually remember anything that has happened – you just have 'blank spots'. Some children may 'block' the experience of sexual assault because they do not have the opportunity to talk about it and feel guilty, bad and fear some terrible punishment. Blocking will result in being able to live an apparently 'normal' life – by never speaking about the assault. However, at some point there is usually an event or 'trigger' that unblocks the feelings and the feelings from the original crisis can return.

## Counselling

There are many reasons why children are not able to talk or find it impossible to talk to those close to them about what has happened.

For example; children may try to protect their parents/family from pain and may not talk because they are afraid that revealing a particular detail or part of the assault will be too painful for their parents to cope with.

Children may not talk because they are confused about who they can trust and who really loves and cares about them. If you feel that the child is unable to talk, has a learning difficulty, is unable to speak or is too young to use language, or seems to be holding something back, or does not seem to be returning to her lifestyle after a few months, then you may consider offering or seeking outside support.

Children who have been assaulted are not 'ill', but they may still need a safe, supportive person outside of their close family, parents or adults to talk to.

## Family Reactions

Each family member can and does respond differently to sexual assault. However, most families go through a 'crisis' stage that involves an emotional reaction and distress associated with learning that a child has been assaulted. Reactions can include:

- Complete disbelief (as they will have also trusted/loved/liked/cared about the abuser).
- Difficulties with sleeping, eating, feeling sick.
- Wanting to kill the abuser.
- Wanting to support the abuser or forgive the abuser because no-one else cares about him, or he is still a member of the family.
- Blaming the child; accusing the child of lying; being an attention seeker; being provocative etc.
- Feeling fear, guilt, anger, grief and not being able to stop thinking or talking about the assault.

Some families blame the mother or main carer immediately or at some point. This can be done in many ways. So, for example – withdrawing support or financial help, refusing to go to court or solicitors, isolating her from family discussions, gossiping or saying that she knew. For many weeks, months and years the family has to re-

organise itself. It is also a time of being fearful, feeling guilt or worrying about how the child is recovering. Some parents may fear or find out about other members of their family who have been abused or other children who have been assaulted by the same man or another man in the family. It can be a time of deep unrest and sadness.

Anger and guilt are difficult feelings to cope with and you may experience, *'If only I ...'* - this is a normal reaction. It is also natural to want to blame someone, but do not blame yourself or the child. The responsibility for the sexual assault belongs to the abuser(s). Anger at the abuser may be difficult to handle and sometimes can lead to 'irrational behaviour'. So, a parent's rage or need for revenge can frighten the child especially if the child thinks it is directed at her rather than the abuser. Other children or members of the family may also become upset or frightened as they themselves may have been assaulted and not talked about it.

Anger and blame is not only directed towards the mother by the family, but also by the child. Children believe adults are all-powerful and often believe mothers are their main protectors and so they can often be angrier at their mothers than the abuser. Sometimes children and older girls will find it safer to direct their feelings of anger towards their mother. When asked whether their mother knew of the abuse they might say, *"Yes she did, definitely"*. Further discussion may show that that they dropped hints and cues in their own way, which made sense at the time that they were trying to tell. Mothers will often take the blame for not reading the signs and signals.

Others do not become angry or show any emotion because they feel they were unable to disclose for want of not burdening their mother or carer because of other difficulties within the family. They may feel responsible for protecting the mother or other siblings from knowing about the sexual assaults they are suffering; or they may feel that she is no position to do anything about it.

### **Looking after yourself**

As a mother or carer you may feel overwhelmed by what has happened to your child. It is important you recognise your own need for support from family and friends. You may decide to contact an organisation or join a group for mothers whose children have been sexually abused to get a different type of support, as you may have a lot of feelings that you need to express instead of trying to deal with at all alone. All of these reactions are normal and will take time, patience and courage to work through. Breaking down time into hours, days or weeks is one way of getting through and ensuring that you are having enough sleep, food and time to yourself is another. You will do some things well and others not so well. Be yourself and try not to 'punish'

yourself when situations become difficult. It's okay to express your feelings such as anger. Giving yourself and your child permission to be angry about the abuse rather than at each other is an important part of recovery.

Mothers and carers often have to cope with a whole range of reactions from their child after disclosure. Asking for help is not easy, especially when you do not feel in a position to explain why it is needed. It is not possible to 'make it up to the child' or 'make it go away'. Activities that encourage the environment to let your child play and express their feelings are more important than promising treats or spending time at activities where communication is not possible.

Do not neglect yourself – you are the one they are depending on and what you do and how you behave will provide important messages on what they can do for themselves. Here are some suggestions from other mothers.

Try to get enough sleep and eat regular, nutritious meals. Not eating or overeating will affect your health and solves nothing. Keep a diary for your own thoughts and a record of what has happened. You may attend appointments or meet professionals whose names and job titles you may not remember in the future. This is particularly helpful if you need to re-contact anyone who was supportive to you or your child or is part of the support network you would like to develop.

If you feel ill or need medical help consult your doctor. Headaches and migraine are common reactions that may need treatment or think about complementary therapies that may be available.

Accept offers of support or be specific about the help you would like. These could be doing your ironing or weekly shopping. Your parenting skills may be 'stretched' to the limit and getting support from other mothers in a group, or parenting organisations may support or equip you in different ways of coping.

Take each day as it comes and do not expect perfection from yourself. If you would like more support, counselling and information please contact SERICC.

## SUMMARY OF LEGAL INFORMATION

In 2003 there were significant changes to the law in the UK. The Sexual Offences Act<sup>3</sup> created a legal framework to protect children of all ages from sexual abuse. It was the first major overhaul of the law for a century. It attempts to close loopholes in the law, set clear limits and boundaries about behaviour with children, and reflects what we know today about the patterns and impact of sexual abuse in childhood. It is designed to meet the 21st century challenges of protecting children and applies to issues such as, internet pornography and 'grooming' children for abuse. It also sets out new and updated laws on the sexual exploitation of children through prostitution, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and pornography.

The Act acknowledges that children are also at risk from people in positions of trust and from within families; as such it provides new legislation against abuse by people who work with children and updates the laws on sexual abuse within families.

All of these measures are designed to provide a clear and effective set of laws – setting strong standards to deter and punish abusers and giving the police and the courts the up-to-date offences they need to do their job; and ensuring that children have the strongest possible protection under the law.

### The laws: protecting children

Under the 2003 law the legal age for young people to consent to have sex is still 16, whether they are straight, gay or bisexual. The aim of the law is to protect the rights and interests of young people and make it easier to prosecute people who pressure or force others into having sex they do not want. Although the age of consent remains at 16, the law is not intended to prosecute mutually consensual teenage sexual activity between two young people of a similar age, unless it involves abuse or exploitation.

Under the Sexual Offences Act young people still have the right to confidential advice on contraception, condoms, pregnancy and abortion, even if they are under 16. It is however important to realise that it can take a long time for people to identify what happened to them in childhood as sexual abuse. The law takes account of this so offences which took place in the past can still be prosecuted. In these cases the offender will be prosecuted under the law which was in force at the time when the offence took place.

<sup>3</sup>Children and Families Safer from Sexual Crime The Sexual Offences Act 2003

As well as the laws in the Sexual Offences Act which are specifically designed to protect children in crimes where the victim does not consent<sup>4</sup> – such as rape and sexual assault – the general laws on these offences can also be applied. For details on these offences, see the separate leaflet in the Home Office series, *Adults: Safer from Sexual Crime*<sup>5</sup>.

## Protecting under 13s

The Sexual Offences Act sets out important laws to give children under 13 the extra protection they need from sexual abuse and set the maximum penalties for abusers. These laws apply to children who have not yet reached their 13th birthday. The law makes it clear that sexual activity with a child under 13 is never acceptable and that, regardless of the circumstances, children of this age can never legally give their consent. All penetrative sex (including penetration of the mouth by the penis) of a child under 13 will be automatically classified as rape, with a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Other offences include assault by penetration (with an object or part of the body), sexual assault (any kind of sexual touching), and causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity (this could include making a child strip, or promising them rewards for sexual behaviour). When any of these offences involve under 13s, they can be charged as specific crimes with tougher sentences. Assault by penetration has a maximum penalty of life in prison. Sexual assault and causing or inciting a child under 13 to engage in sexual activity both carry maximum penalties of 14 years in prison.

## Sexual activity with a child

This part of the Act covers all intercourse, other than penetration or sexual touching of a child. It includes sexual touching of any part of their body, clothed or unclothed, either with your body or with an object. The maximum sentence is 14 years in prison. Again, it is not intended to prosecute two young people of a similar age for engaging in mutually consensual teenage sexual activity, unless it involves abuse or exploitation.

<sup>4</sup> **‘Consent’** – In order to consent to something a person must know what it is she is consenting to and she must be free to say no or yes. In the UK a young child does not have the power to say yes or no to an adult. She is in such a dependent position that she cannot negotiate in that way. Children do not necessarily know what sex is. They want to be held, to have love and affection. It is adults who assign a sexual motivation to a girl's behaviour. *If this makes the adult feel sexual it is they who choose to act on those feelings and not the child.*

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/adults-safe-fr-sex-harm-leaflet>

## Causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity

This covers causing or persuading a child to engage in any sexual activity, including sexual acts with someone else, or making a child strip or masturbate. This offence applies where someone has incited a child to engage in sex even if the intended sexual activity does not take place. The maximum sentence is 14 years in prison.

*Engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child* - under this law it is an offence to intentionally engage in sexual activity when the perpetrator knows that they can be seen by a child, or they believe or intend that they can see, and where this is done in order to get sexual gratification from the fact that they may be watching.

*Causing a child to watch a sexual act* - this makes it an offence to intentionally cause a child to watch someone else taking part in sexual activity – including looking at images such as videos, photos, or webcams – for the purpose of sexual gratification.

## Under 16s

### Meeting a child following sexual grooming

If the perpetrator is over 18 and there has been communication with a child under 16 at least twice (including communication by phone or Internet) it is an offence to meet them or travel to meet them, anywhere in the world with the intention of committing one of the offences above.

### Arranging or facilitating a child sex offence

This makes it an offence to knowingly arrange or carry out an action in any part of the world which will lead to one of the offences above being committed. It could include requesting someone to procure a child (in the UK or abroad), or giving someone else permission to use the house if you believe that the intention is for sexual activity to take place.

## Protecting under 18s

Even though the age of consent is 16 there are a number of situations where it is important to protect 16 to 18 year-olds, as well as younger children from abuse.

### Indecent photographs

Under the Protection of Children Act it is already an offence to take, make, permit to take, distribute, show, possess with intent to distribute, or to advertise indecent photographs of under 16s. The Sexual Offences Act extends the age limit so that this offence also applies to images of 16 and 17 year-olds.

## **Abuse of children through prostitution or pornography**

The Sexual Offences Act sets out a series of offences with heavy sentences covering child prostitution and pornography. The offences include: paying for the sexual services of a child (payment can be in cash or in goods or services, including drugs or waiving of debts); causing or inciting a child into prostitution or pornography in any part of the world; controlling a child involved in prostitution or pornography; and arranging or facilitating child prostitution or pornography.

## **Abuse of positions of trust**

This applies to people who work with children in places like schools, youth services, care homes, the health service and the criminal justice system. Under these laws young people under 18 (and also people with learning disabilities or mental disorders) are protected from abuse by people in positions of trust. A separate leaflet in the Home Office series '*Working Within the Sexual Offences Act*'<sup>6</sup>, gives more detail on these offences.

## **Sexual Offences by family members.**

Most sexual abuse of children takes place within the home, or by people who know the child, or their family. It is very important that the law properly protects children from abuse by people who are close to them; including those people who are supposed to love and care for them.

In order to reflect changing family structures the Sexual Offences Act has widened the definition of 'family'. As well as including blood relations - such as parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, half-brothers and half-sisters, uncles and aunts - the Act now covers wider family members who are, or have been, living in the same household. This includes foster parents, foster siblings, step-parents, cousins, step-brothers and step-sisters. Also, people who regularly care for a child and live in their household - such as a lodger who regularly babysits - are also included under the definition of family during the time they live in the household.

Again, the laws in this section apply where the child is under 18 and they can be enforced even if a child appears to give their consent. Importantly, these laws also apply if the offender is under 18 although maximum sentences are shorter.

## **Sex between adult relatives**

A separate section of the Act deals with sex between adult relatives. These laws make sexual penetration - and consenting to sexual penetration - an offence between adult blood relatives.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.voiceuk.org.uk/docs/care-workers.pdf>



## What happens when the offender is released?

The probation service (victims care) will liaise with you if the offender has received a sentence of 12 months or more. The police officer involved in your case should inform you when the offender is being released if the sentence was 12 months or less. For further information please read – *The leaflet for parents for more advice on helping keep kids safe: 'Keeping children safe from sex offenders'*. If you are not reading this on the internet you can get a copy from SERICC.

## The Criminal Justice System (CJS)

### The Police

The police investigate reported child sexual abuse. If the 'victim' is under 17 years old the police use a specialist department called the Child Abuse Investigation Unit (CAIU) or Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

Reporting to the Police involves an initial report, initial investigation and possibly a follow up investigation. Prosecuting sexual violence, particularly within the family can be difficult within the Criminal Justice system. No young person under 17 should be questioned or medically examined without a parent or guardian with her.

The police will inform you if your child's case is or is not going to court. There are procedures the police will follow as your child will be seen as a 'vulnerable witness'. This means they will be able to give video evidence, be separated from the perpetrator in court and other measures to help them. This should be explained to you by the police officer or witness care service.

### Forensic Evidence / Medical Examination

Children might sometimes see forensic / medical examinations as a test they can pass or fail. This is a good time to reassure your child that she is okay and that the purpose of the medical is to test for specific things, not to pass or fail. You might want to explain what will happen, whether it will hurt and the importance of why it is being done. Stay with her during the examination. The examination will test for different things depending on the age of the child and the type of assault.

The examination may be carried out by in a hospital, a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) or a police victims / witness suite. Forensic evidence will be collected at this time.

## Going to Court

The Court Witness Service should;

- Help explain to you and your child and any other witnesses the court procedures
- Provide court support by helping separate waiting areas, video links and screens
- Facilitate or assist with meetings between victims and any representatives of the criminal justice system.

You also may have been offered additional support from your local *victim support*<sup>7</sup>, or from South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre or your friends and family.

### Preparing for court<sup>8</sup>

Things to discuss with the Witness Service include:

- Organising interpreters, if necessary.
- Arranging for a support person to be present when the child is giving evidence.
- Arranging for the child to give their evidence by closed circuit television.
- Arranging for the child to give all or part of their evidence in the form of a recording.
- Closing the court to the public.

### After the trial

At the end of the court proceedings the prosecutor should take the time to discuss the outcome with you and your child. The child should always be praised whatever the outcome. If charges were withdrawn or guilt was not established you may all need extra support at this time. Make sure you get this support in whichever way you can.

## Criminal Injuries Compensation

Criminal Injuries Compensation for victims of sexual crime is available (with some exceptions). Please talk to SERICC for more detailed information.

The compensation is assessed on paper without you having to go to a hearing, unless you want to appeal against the outcome decision. Usually there has to be a criminal case and a conviction of the abuser - but not always.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.victimsupport.org/vs\\_england\\_wales/services/witness\\_services.php](http://www.victimsupport.org/vs_england_wales/services/witness_services.php)

<sup>8</sup><http://www.cjsonline.gov.uk/victim/walkthrough/index.html>

## Parental responsibility for children

Parental responsibility (PR) is where an adult is responsible for the care and well-being of their child and can make important decisions about their:

- food
- clothing
- education
- home
- medical treatment
- faith

A married couple who have children together both automatically have parental responsibility. Parental responsibility continues after divorce and the judge decides at the divorce hearing whether this continues to be both parents. Where the parents are not married, the unmarried father has parental responsibility if:

- His name is registered on the birth certificate – this is the case for births registered after 1 December 2003 (fathers can re-register if their names have not been placed on the birth certificate before this date).
- He later marries the mother.
- Both parents have signed an authorised parental responsibility agreement.
- He obtains a Parental Responsibility Order from the Court.
- He obtains a Residence Order from the Court.
- He becomes the child's guardian.

Others, such as grandparents and stepparents, do not have parental responsibility. They can acquire it by:

- Being appointed as a guardian to care for a child if the parent dies.
- Obtaining a Residence Order from the Court for a child to live with them.
- Adopting the child.

If you are living permanently with a child, in a parental role, you may feel you want the authority, stability and recognition. This is especially so if the other parent has no contact, is abroad, unknown or dead. Without parental responsibility you cannot make the decisions about a child's life, such as choice of school or faith, surname or guardian on your death.

If you are a step-parent you cannot automatically have the child live with you on the death of a resident parent unless you have parental responsibility. The child can also decide on the medical treatment for herself once she is 16 or younger if the doctor believes that she is able to understand the importance and consequences of such decisions.

Several people can have parental responsibility at the same time. Adoption and care proceedings are different. Parental responsibility can be lost:

- In the case of parents their child is adopted.
- In the case of a person having acquired parental responsibility through a Court Order; that Order later being revoked by the Court.
- In the case of a local authority with Care Order and the Court later revoking the Care Order.
- In the case of a guardian where the Court appoints another guardian.

### **Child protection**

Under British law however, a parent's rights exist to protect the welfare and development of the child. If these are threatened, or the parents cannot protect their children, then it is possible the local authority (social services) would seek to take action.

They will do so if they believe it is possible that:

- The child is being physically abused.
- The child is being neglected (not properly fed or clothed or left alone or in charge of other children when too young to do so).
- The child is being sexually abused or exploited.

If social services, health or education workers have reason to believe that a child needs protection then a social worker will become involved.

## Contact with child/ren

Every child born to a married woman is presumed to be her husband's child unless there is evidence to the contrary. If you and your partner separate, then you and your partner may make an informal arrangement for contact with the child. If this is not possible then a court can be asked to intervene. The Court Order will usually allow contact between the child and the parent with whom the child is not living, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The court will likely grant a Contact Order unless you can give strong reasons why this would not be in the child's best interests. This is because the law gives the child a fundamental right to meaningful contact with the non-resident parent as long as it is safe and in the child's best interests.

You will need legal advice and representation if you wish to oppose the father's application for contact or residence.

There is no legal connection between whether the father has contact with the child and whether he is paying child maintenance which he is legally obliged to do under the Child Support Act. Similarly, the fact that the father is paying maintenance does not give him an automatic right to see the child.

## Resources and Additional Information Booklist

The DABS web based book service provides recommended books with free postage DABS Directory and Book Services (DABS) <http://www.dabsbooks.co.uk> All books listed here are available from Amazon web site or your local bookshop or library. They have been linked to Amazon so that you can read more about the books

### Title

Woman's Place  
Against Our Will (Men, Women and Rape)  
Black Girls speak out  
Breaking the Bonds  
Conspiracy of Silence  
Cry Hard and Swim  
Don't A Woman's Word  
Father Daughter Incest  
Father Daughter Rape  
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings  
I Never Told Anyone  
Incest: Fact and Myth  
Kiss Daddy Goodnight  
Mothers Surviving  
Out in the Open  
Out of the Shadows  
Push Me Pull Me  
Rape the Misunderstood Crime  
Rape the Ultimate Violation  
Respect: A girls guide to getting respect  
Shining Through  
The Age of the Sex Crime  
The Best Kept Secret - Sexual Abuse of Children  
The Colour Purple  
The Sex Book: A nonsense guide for teenagers  
Strong Mothers Resource book for Mothers of Children who have been sexually assaulted.

<b>Author</b>	<b>International book standard number</b>
Monica Vincent	0582524105
Susan Brownmiller	0671220624
Khadj Rouf	0907324606
Dorothy Rowe	0006375650
Sandra Butler	0912078650
Jacqueline Spring	0860688135
Ella Danica	0921881053
Judith Lewis Herman	0674295064
Elizabeth Ward	0802152074
Maya Angelou	086068511X
Ellen Bass and Louise Thorton	006091050X
Sarah Nelson	0907343023
Louise Armstrong	0671680560
Carol-Ann Hooper	0415071887
Ouaine Bain, Maureen Sanders	85381184X
Anne Marie West	0671855166
Sandra Chick	0704349019
Julie A. Allison, Lawrence S. Wrightsman	0803937075
Judith Rowland	0745300928
Courtney Macavinta and Andrea Vander Pluym	1575421771
Mindy B. Loiselle, Leslie Bailey Wright	1884444393
Jane Caputi	0879723866
Florence Rush	0830639071
Alice Walker	0704346664
Jane Pavanel	1840464720
Anne Peake	189892404X

## Useful telephone numbers

South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre	☎ 01375 380609
National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)	☎ 0800 800 500
Respond (specialist support regarding children who have learning difficulties and have been sexually abused)	☎ 0845 606 1503
ChildLine (helpline for children/young people)	☎ 0800 1111
Parentline (helpline for parents/carers)	☎ 0808 800 2222
Gingerbread	☎ 020 7488 9300
Children's Legal Centre	☎ 01206 873 820
Association of Child Abuse Lawyers	☎ 01923 286 888
Rights of Women (Free legal advice by women for women)	☎ 020 7251 6575
Women's Aid (National domestic violence helpline)	☎ 0845 702 3468
Samaritans	☎ 0345 90 90 90
Threshold InfoLine (mental health information run by women for women)	☎ 0845 3000 911
Victim Support Helpline	☎ 0845 303 0900
British Association of Counsellors	☎ 08704 435252
I in 4 (for male and female survivors of sexual abuse, run by survivors)	☎ 020 8697 2112
MIND (mental health helpline)	☎ 08457 660163
Young Minds (Mental health helpline for young people)	☎ 020 7336 84



## Useful web sites

There are many useful websites and links. Please visit SERICC's site if you would like more information. Listed below are some SERICC have found helpful.

South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre


**[www.sericc.org.uk](http://www.sericc.org.uk)**

 01375 380609

MOSAC

**[www.mosac.org.uk](http://www.mosac.org.uk)**


Supporting non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children.

 0800 980 1958

NAPAC

**[www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)**

National Association for People Abused in Childhood.

 0800 085 3330

One in Four

**[www.oneinfour.org.uk](http://www.oneinfour.org.uk)**

One in Four is run for and by survivors of sexual abuse.

 020 8697 2112

Kidscape

**[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)**


Useful information for children and young people.

 020 7730 3300

Brook Young People's Information Service

**[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)**

Information, support and signposting service for young people under 25 on sexual health.

 0800 0185 023

Children's Legal Centre:


**[www.childrenslegalcentre.com](http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com)**

Represents the interests of children and young people. Providing free advice and information service by letter and phone.

 01206 873820







Do you need to talk to someone about  
**rape or sexual  
abuse?**

It could have happened a long time ago or more recently.

If you are worried, need support or information, you can call our helpline:

**SOUTH ESSEX RAPE  
& INCEST CRISIS CENTRE**

**01375 380609**

**[www.sericc.org.uk](http://www.sericc.org.uk)**



**South Essex  
Rape & Incest  
Crisis Centre**

Registered charity No. 287762

Our 24 hour answerphone will tell you our helpline times, or leave a message and we will call you back as soon as possible.

We offer a confidential helpline, 'one-to-one' counselling and support for women and girls who have suffered or are suffering sexual violence.

*Run for women, by women*