

# Familial Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Multi-Agency Practice Audit

## Learning Briefing

### What is familial child sexual abuse?

In this form of abuse, a family member involves a child in sexual behaviours or activities. The perpetrator may not be a blood relative but could be someone who is considered “part of the family”.

The Children’s Commissioner’s definition:

*‘Child sexual abuse in the family environment is defined as sexual abuse perpetrated or facilitated in or out of the home, against a child under the age of 18, by a family member, or someone otherwise linked to the family context or environment, whether or not they are a family member.’*

### Why local practice was reviewed

In 2015, the Children’s Commissioner carried out an inquiry into child sexual abuse in the family environment and found that **1 in 8 children who are sexually abused are identified by professionals, and while the police and local authorities recorded around 50,000 cases of sexual abuse over the two years to March 2014, it is estimated that as many as 450,000 children were abused over the same period.** Following the Children’s Commissioners report a series of themed Joint Agency Targeted Inspection (JATi) were undertaken and the overview of the findings from each inspection was published in February 2020 to consider how professionals worked together in cases of sexual abuse.

The Hounslow Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP) adopted Familial Child Sexual Abuse as a priority area for practice improvement in 2019. In October 2020 a multi-agency audit was undertaken in order to consider the work with children who may be at risk of, or who have experienced, sexual abuse within their family. Ten children from different families were considered. The child had not necessarily been abused but instead a risk of sexual abuse may have been identified. All of the children were currently on a plan, either child in need, child protection or in the care of the local authority.

### Learning from local practice

Think the  
unthinkable

Professionals must have an open mind that sexual abuse may be an issue in any family they work with. Sexual abuse does happen, it can happen to very young children, to boys as well as girls, to disabled children, to children from all ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and can be perpetrated by close family members. Reflective practice should be encouraged by all agencies, to support professionals to think about sexual abuse, as hard as it may be to consider such a thing is even possible.

## Complex & emotional

CSA is complex work that has an emotional impact on all of the professionals involved with many reporting feelings of shock, disbelief and intense sadness. Professionals should have access expert advice, guidance and support.

## Professional confidence

- There is a lack of or misplaced professional confidence around working with CSA cases. Professionals need appropriate knowledge about perpetrators of sexual abuse to consider their ability to manipulate professionals and family members. The impact of ongoing contact between the perpetrator and the child and the lack of experience and knowledge of sexual abuse of those supervising the contact. In CSA cases the presumption that contact is beneficial needs to be balanced with the risk of grooming and undermining of victims and expert advice should be sought.

## Perpetrators

- Perpetrators of sexual abuse are known to groom children, family members and professionals. They may be plausible, charming, needy or intimidating. When there are concerns that a child has sexually abused another child in the family, both the alleged perpetrator and victim need to be considered as children in their own right. It is difficult for the parent/s to accept what has happened, to protect the victim and to support the perpetrator and needs particular focus in assessments and plans. Consideration should also be given to whether the perpetrating child is being abused themselves.

## Disclosure

- Systems mean that there is an over-reliance on a child disclosing sexual abuse in order to protect them. Professionals need to be curious about their behaviour and identify other indicators that they may be a victim of sexual abuse and continually challenge and be curious about the source of children's distress, this can lead to missed opportunities to recognise and stop sexual abuse.
- If a child does disclose there may not be a successful criminal investigation. It is essential to be clear why the decision was made, particularly if there is an on-going relationship with the family. The decision can then be explained to the child in a developmentally appropriate way and repeated as the child gets older and has increased understanding.
- Children from some BME groups, and children with disabilities or learning difficulties may face additional barriers to disclosure.

## Historical & cultural factors

- Children are likely to be more vulnerable to CSA if they are disabled, a young carer, have health needs, have suffered a significant bereavement, have witnessed domestic abuse at home, have a history of neglect or physical abuse, have a parent who was sexually abused in childhood, and/or who has mental health issues or learning needs. There is evidence that perpetrators can target vulnerable children because they may believe they are less likely to disclose the abuse or be believed if they do.
- CSA happens in all communities. It is not more likely or acceptable in any culture. The approach to CSA needs to consider the impact of CSA on the child or family within their culture however, and there needs to be sensitivity to this.

## Relationships

Children disclose to a professional who they know well, and a significant and positive relationship will support this. The opportunity to build a relationship with a child when a professional has concerns or a 'gut feeling' about sexual abuse is important. Information sharing between professionals is important in these cases, as the child may feel more able to speak to a teacher or health professional.

## Reflective questions for professionals

The learning from the audit have led to identification of the following questions that professionals could consider when they are working with similar cases.

1. Am I aware that a large number of children in Hounslow are likely to be sexually abused without disclosing or without any professional identifying what is happening?
2. Do I have enough experience of sexual abuse in a family environment to be confident that I can safeguard a child or will I need to seek expert advice?
3. Do I have adequate and appropriate knowledge about perpetrators of sexual abuse? Do I understand how they may groom and manipulate, how they their behaviour may escalate, and how to safeguard children from CSA?
4. When there are concerns that a child has sexually abused another child in the family, do I ensure that both the alleged perpetrator and victim are considered as children in their own right? Do I consider if the perpetrating child is being abused themselves?
5. Do I recognise that vulnerable children may be more at risk of CSA?
6. Am I aware CSA happens in all communities but that it is not either more likely or acceptable in any culture? Do I ensure I receive support and advice to ensure my approach to CSA is sensitive to the culture of the child and family and challenge those who do not?
7. Am I always challenging and curious about a child's behaviour and aware of the indicators that a child may be a victim of sexual abuse?
8. If the police or the CPS decide that a case will not be pursued criminally, do I make sure I am aware of the reason for the decision, do I challenge the decision if required, and do I ensure it is explained to the child in a developmentally appropriate way.
9. Do I try to build a positive relationship with a child and give them time and opportunity to speak to me if they are concerned about anything?
10. Do I always share information in cases where a child may be at risk of CSA?
11. Do I compile or request chronologies, genograms and ecograms for families where there is a concern about sexual abuse?
12. Am I assertive about who needs to be at a strategy meeting and request further meetings until the child protection investigation is completed?

## **Further reading**

### **Research**

[Protecting children from harm | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/protecting-children-from-harm/)

[Multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment joint targeted area inspections \(JTAs\) \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67442/multi-agency-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-in-the-family-environment-jtais.pdf)

[Child sexual abuse: learning from case reviews | NSPCC Learning](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/learning/child-sexual-abuse-learning-from-case-reviews/)

[“People don't talk about it”: Child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/research/our-research/the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/measuring-the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/)

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/measuring-the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/>

### **Resources**

[Home - CSA Centre](https://www.csacentre.org.uk/)

[Making Noise: Children's Voices for Positive Change after Sexual Abuse - The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking | University of Bedfordshire \(beds.ac.uk\)](https://www.beds.ac.uk/making-noise/)

[Inquiry publishes the report, 'Victim and Survivor Voices from the Truth Project' | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/research/our-research/victim-and-survivor-voices-from-the-truth-project/)

[Talk PANTS & Join Pantosaurus - The Underwear Rule | NSPCC](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/learning/talk-pants-join-pantosaurus-the-underwear-rule/)