



# Looking After Yourself and Your Child



Synergy Essex provides information and support services for anyone who has been sexually abused or raped, or who has been affected by sexual violence and abuse and abuse and abuse at any time in their lives.

Synergy Essex is a partnership of three Rape Crisis Centres comprising SERICC Rape & Sexual Abuse Specialist Service, Southend Rape Crisis Centre (SOSRC) and mid and north Essex Centre for Action on Rape and Abuse (CARA), offering an Essex wide service providing specialist emotional support, counselling, advocacy and other services to help adults, children, young people, their families and supporters.

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# What is sexual violence and abuse? What is consent?

If you only have a few minutes to go through this booklet, just look out for these boxes.

Sexual violence and abuse is a term that is used to cover all forms of sexual harm, including rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse and online sexual abuse. Sexual violence and abuse is any sexual contact that is not consensual. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 says that a person consents to sexual activity if they agree by choice and have the freedom and capacity to consent.

Freedom to consent means that there are no forms of persuasion or coercion used that might lead someone to make a choice they would not otherwise make. The person must be genuinely free to agree to sexual activity without there being any reward (financial or otherwise) or to decline it without any negative repercussions. If someone says 'yes' because they are worried about what will happen if they say 'no', then they have not consented freely.

Capacity to consent means that the person is fully able to understand what they are choosing, that they are mentally and emotionally well enough, mature enough and that they are not under the influence of any substances which would impede decision making. Lots of things reduce our capacity including age (which is why we have an age of consent of 16), alcohol, recreational drugs, prescription drugs, some mental health conditions, some learning disabilities and some neurological differences.

In this guide we use the term 'sexual violence and abuse' to cover a whole range of experiences including those that do not involve physical contact such as online grooming, because all of these can have a significant impact on a child's wellbeing. Human brains experience sexual violence and abuse as trauma and that means children might have unexpected or unpredictable responses to what they have been through. There is more information about trauma further on.

Sexual violence and abuse is a term that covers all forms of sexual harm, even where no touching has occurred.

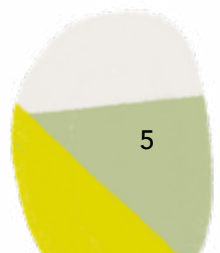
## How can this guide help you?

When a child experiences any form of sexual violence and abuse, we understand that the impacts go far beyond the child. We hope this guide will be helpful if you are involved in caring for a child who has experienced sexual violence and abuse. It is designed to help you understand how the child may be responding to their thoughts and feelings, and we have included ideas for trying to help your child cope and suggestions for taking care of yourself too.

Throughout the guide we refer to 'your child' but the content may be useful for anyone who has any caring responsibilities for a child or children – you might be a foster carer, a step parent, a grandparent, a sibling or a member of the child's extended family.

We use the word 'child' as shorthand for anyone under the age of 18. We also use the term victim/survivor for someone who has experienced any form of sexual violence and abuse.

The information in this guide is provided to try to help you understand the possible impacts of sexual violence and abuse and to offer you some ideas of how you can manage those impacts. We believe that, if you understand the way that sexual violence and abuse might affect your child's mind and body, the way they behave and the way they feel will hopefully begin to make more sense to you. Not everything in the guide will be relevant to you and some of the ideas may not work for you and your child. The intention is to help you to better understand what has happened and how you can manage your responses to it. Sharing this guide with others who care for your child may help them to get a better understanding of what you and your child are experiencing, and ensure your child is getting consistent support.



## Myths and Reality

There are many myths or false beliefs about sexual violence and abuse, including child sexual abuse. You may have heard these myths before in the media or from people you know and they are often presented as fact. Unfortunately, believing these myths leads people to blame the victim/survivor of sexual violence and abuse for what the perpetrator has done to them. Knowing the truth behind the myths can help you to understand that it is the perpetrator who is to blame for what your child has been through.

**MYTH:** If children told someone then the sexual abuse would stop.

**FACT:** Children who are experiencing or who have experienced any form of sexual violence and abuse often tell us about what they are feeling, but they do not always say it in a way we can understand easily. For example, children may not tell us in words what has happened and instead they may show their anger or anxiety through their behaviour instead. They may not have the right words or even understand what is happening, they may be wary of upsetting people or getting into trouble or they may have very confused feelings about the perpetrator and feel that they love them. Perpetrators will use all kinds of manipulation to stop the child from speaking out and often make direct threats against a loved one or pet – there are lots of very understandable reasons for a victim/survivor to keep quiet about what they have been through.

Even when children state very clearly what has happened to them, they are not always believed, and not always helped to get safe. Adults do not always listen properly, or understand what a child is trying to tell them. When a child does find a way to tell someone, whoever it is, the most important thing to remember is that they have taken a really brave step, and they have a right to be supported. A supportive response from family members and carers is crucial in supporting any child to recover from the trauma of sexual violence and abuse. This support is important even if no criminal justice case is taken forward.

Any disclosure, no matter when it happens or who hears it, should be a positive step towards a child being able to feel safe and get the right support.

**MYTH:** Children lie about sexual abuse.

**FACT:** There is very, very little evidence that anyone, including children, lies about sexual violence and abuse. Research by the Crown Prosecution Service in 2013 found that 0.6% of allegations of rape that reached them for charging were false allegations. Sometimes it is easier to believe that children would lie about sexual abuse than to have to think that perpetrators would knowingly and deliberately harm them. The myth that children lie helps perpetrators to continue to sexually abuse them and silences victims/survivors, meaning they may not tell anyone.

It is very rare for anyone to lie about sexual violence and abuse.

**MYTH:** Not all sexual violence and abuse is harmful to children.

**FACT:** Some perpetrators will claim that children enjoy sexual acts and that they initiate them. This is an attempt to remove all responsibility from the perpetrator for causing harm and to lay blame with the child. The perpetrator is always responsible for their actions and the harm they cause. The perpetrator takes away the child's choices and violates their boundaries, and this will always be harmful to the child in some way.

Some people believe that if children don't talk about the sexual abuse, it means that they have forgotten it and it hasn't had a negative impact. This isn't necessarily the case and the child may still be dealing with difficult thoughts and feelings even if they appear to have forgotten what happened. It's important to check in with your child and be aware of their emotions and behaviours.

Sexual violence and abuse is a type of trauma and the right kind of support can help a child to manage the way the trauma has left them feeling.

**MYTH:** Children who are sexually abused go on to perpetrate sexual abuse.

**FACT:** There is very little evidence to support this myth. It is true that some perpetrators say that they experienced child sexual abuse, but this does not mean their experiences caused them to go on to harm others. Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse, so, if being sexually abused caused you to become an abuser, there would be many, many more female abusers. Because the vast majority of perpetrators are male, we can see just how wrong this myth is. Some children who experience sexual abuse may exhibit harmful sexual behaviours, possibly directed towards other children, as a response to their abuse and they need support to address these behaviours, but there is no evidence that a cycle of sexual abuse exists. Survivors of sexual violence and abuse are very often kind and caring to other people because they know how awful it feels when another person is unkind or uncaring.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse are highly unlikely to go on to harm others.

**MYTH:** Parents are to blame if their child is sexually abused.

**FACT:** It is often assumed that parents, especially mothers, should have known about the sexual abuse perpetrated against their child and they should have stopped it. Many parents have no idea because perpetrators deliberately hide their actions and manipulate situations to suit them. It is important to know what responses to sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviours might look like to help you safeguard your child, but it is really important that we put the responsibility for the sexual abuse of a child onto the perpetrator of that abuse.

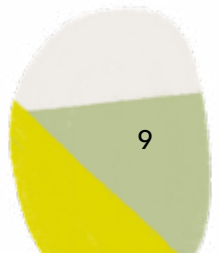




One of the difficulties for anyone is that the “warning signs” or indicators of being a victim/survivor of sexual violence and abuse vary from child to child, and with age. Children respond to all kinds of trauma with changes to their behaviour and new coping mechanisms, so it is often difficult to pinpoint child sexual abuse as the cause. Big events like moving home, bereavement and parental separation are often experienced by children as traumatic and so it is common to see things like bedwetting in younger children, or self harm and eating disorders in older children without necessarily linking it to child sexual abuse.

Whatever the cause of the child’s trauma, the crucial thing for their wellbeing is that they feel safe enough to ask for help when they need it and that there are people who can talk to them kindly about how they are feeling.

**Perpetrators are totally responsible for sexual violence and abuse, and usually put a great deal of effort into making sure that a child will not tell anyone.**



# Vicarious Trauma

When someone close to you has experienced trauma, you may find yourself affected by this and experiencing your own trauma responses. This is called vicarious or secondary trauma – it means that your body and mind are dealing with similar feelings to the child you are trying to support. You may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, problems sleeping, weight gain or weight loss, and lack of energy. You may notice changes to your behaviour such as increased drinking, eating or smoking. You may keep putting things off that you need to do and find it difficult to get motivated. You may not want to be around other people or feel overly critical of others. You may find your emotions are affected and that you feel anxious, irritable, lonely or depressed. You may find that you cry easily and frequently or that you feel numb. You may feel like it is difficult to concentrate and that you are more forgetful than usual. You may struggle to find fun or enjoyment in things you usually like and find it hard to make decisions.

These are all natural and normal responses when someone you love or care for has been harmed. Like many parents and carers, you may find yourself prioritising your child's needs and neglecting your own. The end result of this can be that you are not well enough, physically or emotionally, to be able to care for your child.

When you are on a plane the safety instructions tell you that, if the air pressure fails and you need to use oxygen masks, you must secure your own mask before trying to help anyone who cannot do their own, such as a child. The same is true for supporting a child who has experienced trauma. In order to take good care of your child, you must take good care of yourself. It is not selfish to do so. In fact, it is for the benefit of your child. Looking after yourself is sometimes called 'self-care'.

**Feeling the impacts of trauma is a natural and normal response to someone you care for being harmed. Self-care is important to make sure you are well enough to care for your child – and other people you might have responsibility for.**

# Coping Strategies and Self-Care

The phrase self-care is often used to refer to any lifestyle choices or techniques that someone uses to help them manage mental health issues or to help them achieve positive emotional well-being. The term can also be used by those with disabilities to mean taking notice of how you feel and working with others to manage your physical and emotional health. Some types of self-care you can do for yourself and by yourself while other techniques might require support from others. Self-care isn't something you need to do alone and it is important to ask for support when you feel it would be beneficial. We understand that self-care means different things to different people and that you are probably the person who can best work out what is going to help you the most.

Sometimes when we feel really distressed, there isn't anything that can be done to remove the problem instantly or permanently. This might be especially true if your life has been turned upside down by finding out that your child is a victim/survivor of sexual violence and abuse and having all sorts of appointments with police, social workers etc – none of which is within your control. In this sort of situation, it can be really useful to have some healthy and constructive coping strategies to help manage the way we feel so we can find ways to keep going.

The following skills and techniques are things you can try in those moments when you feel really upset or angry or when you feel like you can't contain your emotions. They won't solve the problem forever, but they may help you tolerate the feeling for long enough to stop the situation getting worse. Not every technique will work for every person so you might need to try several and persevere with some before you see positive results. You might find that some techniques are also suitable for your child and you can practise them together.

- Break time down into hours, days or weeks and focus on getting through each bit at a time. Thinking about the whole day stretching out in front of you can feel challenging so just plan what you need to do to get breakfast done, then just the school run, then to lunchtime and so on.

- Give yourself permission to feel angry, hurt, upset and sad about what has happened so those emotions are focused on the incident rather than those around you.
- If you feel unwell or are having suicidal thoughts, make an appointment to see your GP and let them know what you are feeling and what is going on for you. If you are having counselling, you can talk these feelings through with your counsellor.
- It is often helpful to have someone who is non-judgmental to talk to in confidence about what has happened so you may want to access counselling, which provides a space for you to focus on your own emotional well-being. Even if you can talk really honestly with good friends and/or family, it can be useful to have the opportunity to talk things through with someone who is completely separate from your everyday life.
- Our Self Care Guide has further suggestions for looking after yourself well, and obviously the internet can be a great resource for other ideas.

Try to be kind to yourself and ask for help or support when you feel that you need it.

## **Eat, sleep and move**

Trauma responses can sometimes feel impossible to manage and it might feel like they take over your life, making it difficult to do the things you need to or want to. There are things you can try that might help. When you feel low or you are feeling demotivated, it can be really difficult to get yourself up and moving. It can sometimes feel much easier to stay in bed or hide away from everyone. One good way of trying to lift your mood and to make you feel more emotionally able to deal with the day is to remember that, at some point everyday, you need to eat, sleep and move.

Make sure you eat regular, nutritious meals and make sure you take time to have drinks throughout the day, even if you do not feel hungry or thirsty. You need to have energy and be properly hydrated to be able to feel physically well enough to care for your child.



Work out a sleep routine so you can try to get enough sleep. This might include setting yourself a bedtime and sticking to it, having a bath or using scented candles to relax, reading or listening to soothing music. Try to avoid using screens (TV, tablet, phone etc.) for at least half an hour before going to bed.

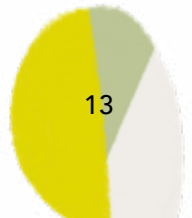
Think about how your body feels when you have done exercise, whether that's going for a walk, playing around with a pet or a full-on gym session. Try to get moving in some way each day.

Try thinking about your eating, sleeping and exercise patterns so you can work out what makes your body feel good – and get everyone in your household involved.

## Get to know your nervous system

Your nervous system is the part of your body that makes sense of information coming in through your senses which is then used to make decisions about your actions and responses. When you feel distressed for any reason, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in. Its job is to prepare your body for frightening or stressful situations. It does this by increasing your heart rate and the blood flow to your muscles so you can run or fight if you need to, and sometimes it might make you freeze or flop. None of these responses are helpful when you are just trying to get on with your day, so it is good to try to notice when it happens and find some ways of taking back control of your body. One thing you can try is to activate your parasympathetic nervous system so that your sympathetic nervous system can calm down. The parasympathetic nervous system calms our body back down after fight or flight responses, and it is the part which is running our digestion and other bodily functions when we are safe and well. This means it can be helpful to bring the parasympathetic nervous system back into control so we can feel calm and capable of doing what we need to do. Some quick ways you can do this include:

- Put your wrists under a cold tap, splash cold water on your face or hold an icepack or some ice cubes in a bag on your face.



- Try and do a really big sigh three or four times.
- Practise circular breathing. For example, breathe in for the count of four, hold your breath for the count of four and breathe out for the count of eight.
- Clench your fists as hard as you can, hold for the count of four and release.
- Do some intense exercise for a short amount of time. For example, 10 enthusiastic star jumps or running on the spot as fast as you can for 30 seconds.
- Feel the texture of different objects around you. For example, the covering on your chair, cushions, mugs or glasses, your hair.
- Smell something you know you like – a favourite perfume, or an essential oil like lavender or rosemary.
- Count all the green/blue/red objects you can see around you.
- Listen really hard and see how many different sounds you can identify.
- See how long you can keep a piece of chocolate in your mouth, and notice how the taste of it might change over time.

Activating any of your senses (touch, sight, hearing, taste, smell) is likely to be helpful in getting your parasympathetic nervous system back in control so you can get on with your day. All these examples help your brain to focus hard on what your body is feeling, this gives information to your nervous system that you are safe and makes it easier to stay calm and in control.

Knowing your body can help you to manage your feelings. Once you know how your body responds to different feelings, it is easier to find ways to stay in control.

## Grounding techniques

We can sometimes convince ourselves that every thought we have is important and true. If we think something bad about ourselves we may then assume, just because we thought it, it's a fact. The real fact is that some of our thoughts are not worth paying much attention to. Plus, we don't have time to dwell on every single thought we have, but our brains sometimes feel as if they are trying to do that. It can feel chaotic, noisy and endless in our minds when this happens. It is common for this feeling to start when there are a lot of things going on in our lives.

Grounding techniques are ways of slowing down our minds and managing anxiety or other difficult emotions. They can be done anywhere at any time and no one needs to know you are doing one. Grounding focuses on the here and now and is more than just a relaxation strategy, it can be used to help you manage extreme feelings. Grounding techniques can train our nervous systems to stay calm. This helps us manage all sorts of difficult situations and emotions. If our nervous system can sense that we are staying grounded, it is less likely to trigger a reaction which feels unmanageable. Like the exercises above, these techniques help your parasympathetic nervous system take back control so that you can feel calm and able to carry on.

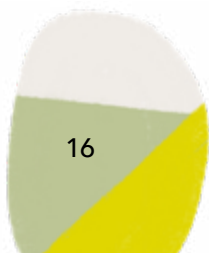
## Mental grounding

- Imagine the unhelpful thought in a bubble, floating in your mind. Say to yourself: "I see that you are trying to get my attention but you can't have it right now" and then imagine the bubble floating away or being blown away by a breeze. If it is a very persistent thought, imagine pushing it away with more enthusiasm, for example with a quick shove.
- Describe your physical environment to yourself in detail. For example, I am sitting in a waiting room, there are magazines on the table in the corner of the room, there are posters on the wall . . .
- Follow a well-known journey in your head. For example, a bus route or walk you know really well.

- Follow a recipe in your head, for example, go through step by step from taking ingredients out of the fridge to chopping vegetables to the stages of cooking.
- Have an affirmation you repeat to yourself. For example, 'this too shall pass' or 'I am safe, I am here now'.
- Concentrate on a mental challenge. For example, say the alphabet to yourself backwards, try to say the lyrics to a whole song out loud or go through times tables.
- Imagine a safe place or somewhere you would like to go. For example, a tropical beach or mountain hideaway.
- Create a go-to-box of good thoughts using items that explore your senses - a favourite picture, textures you like to feel, smells that you like or remind you of something/someone special and maybe some sounds which have meaning for you.

All these examples help your brain to focus hard on thinking about what you have chosen, so it is less likely to spiral off into intrusive thoughts or overthinking. All of them will help your parasympathetic nervous system to remain in control.

Using techniques to remind yourself you are in the present, right here and now, can help you to manage difficult thoughts and feelings.





## How other people can help us cope

Humans are designed to be sociable even if we do not always feel this way. Think about the people around you and how they can support you. Some people may have a much more significant role than others but even those whose contribution is just saying 'hello' are important. Even when it feels like you have no one, there may be people around who can support you in some way. Try and work out who the safe and good people are in your life. We don't have to have loads of friends; the evidence suggests that even one safe person we trust can make a huge difference in our lives. The same is true of family members. Just because someone is related to us does not mean that we have to allow them in our lives. Do not feel that you have to maintain contact with your family if your family is what makes life difficult for you.

Aside from genuine friends and trusted family members, you might have professionals who can help with specific things, for example your GP, counsellor, advocate or support worker. It is important to allow yourself to ask for help if you need it. If your child is at school or college, reaching out to a staff member who knows your child – maybe someone from the pastoral team or student support - can help them to understand what your child might be going through and ensure the right support is put in place to help. If your child is older and able to do this themselves, encourage them to do it with your support rather than doing it for them. This will help them feel a bit more in control at a difficult time.

When you are not in a good place, it can be hard to remember who might be able to help so maybe write yourself a list which might be useful at a difficult time. You could include anyone who is in your support network and even remind yourself what support they can give you. Are there any things you need that you don't get at the moment? Who could support you with those things? If you can't think, is there maybe someone you can ask to help you work out the best place to get that support? Remind yourself that it is alright to ask for help. People can be helpful without necessarily knowing all the details of what is going on for you and your child.

Try to work out what you need help with, and who is in your support network who could support you in some way.

## Reactions to what has happened

'Disclosure' is the word used to describe the act of someone telling someone else about their experience of sexual violence and abuse. Children and young people make disclosures in a variety of ways. They may tell a friend, they may tell an adult at school, or they may call a support line. It is not unusual for a child to tell someone other than their parent or the person closest to them. You may ask yourself why your child didn't tell you and feel hurt by them choosing someone else to disclose to. There are all sorts of reasons why children and young people may not tell their parents first: for example, they might be worried about their parent's reactions, either that they will get in trouble or that their parent will be upset. This is the child's perception of what might happen so it may not make sense to you that they would feel that way. It is also often very difficult for the child to tell anyone because the perpetrator is likely to have made them feel like they cannot tell, maybe because they or something/ someone they care about will come to more harm, because no one will believe them or because they will lose out on something they feel like they want, such as attention.

One way to look at any disclosure is to focus on the fact that your child told someone, no matter who it was, and that is a very good thing. Now that you know, you can work together to deal with what has happened to them and to try to stop further harm by getting the right support.

It is very common for parents and carers to feel confused by what their child has disclosed. It may feel like what your child is saying just doesn't make sense and that you cannot comprehend how it happened. This is a normal reaction because sexual violence and abuse is not a typical part of most of our lives. If we do not have previous experience of sexual violence and abuse ourselves, the reasons why a perpetrator would deliberately cause someone else harm are difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of. If the perpetrator is someone you know, it may be difficult to reconcile how that person behaves towards you with what your child is saying and this is because many perpetrators will be manipulative and deliberately present themselves in ways that make them seem safe and kind in order for them to be able to perpetrate harm.

It is very common to feel angry about the whole situation and to feel angry towards the perpetrator. You may also feel angry with other family members for how they have responded or you may feel angry with yourself in some way. You might feel guilty for not protecting your child or not suspecting what was happening. You may even feel angry with your child for not telling you or for “getting themselves into that situation”. You might feel angry with the police or social workers, and sometimes with everyone. Whilst these feelings are all understandable, it is very important to remember that the only person responsible for the sexual violence and abuse is the perpetrator who chose to commit those sexual offences.

Feelings of confusion, anger and guilt are common. Remember, the perpetrator is totally responsible for the choices they made and their actions.

# Working with professionals

You may have lots of people contacting you and you may have to attend appointments with different people – it can become confusing and overwhelming. Getting organised can help you feel more in control.

- If you don't have one already, get yourself a diary or calendar – or use the one on your phone.
- Set reminders on your phone and/or have a list on the fridge door (or somewhere else you see daily) to remind you about things.
- For meetings and appointments, try to write down the following to help you keep track:
  - What is the meeting/appointment for?
  - Is it just for you, just for your child or do both of you need to be there?
  - Where will the meeting be held?
  - Who else is going to be there?
  - Can you take a friend or worker to support you?
  - Who is organising the meeting or appointment?
  - What is their job?
  - What is their phone number or email?
- Take pen and paper with you (or use your phone) so you can take notes at the meeting/appointment of anything important mentioned.
- If you are unable to attend, it is a good idea to let the organiser know with as much notice as possible so that it can hopefully be rearranged.
- If you are running late it is a good idea to let the organiser know when you think you might arrive.
- Take your diary or calendar with you in case the next appointment/meeting date is arranged at the end of the appointment/meeting.

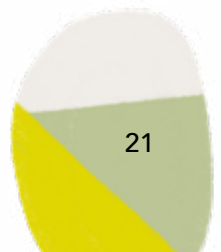


Professionals, such as social workers, police officers and teachers, are an important part of keeping your child safe but sometimes the relationship you have with them can feel challenging. For example, it may feel like they are questioning your ability to parent your child effectively or you may feel that they are blaming you for events that are not your responsibility. Despite these difficulties, it is important that you work hard to engage with professionals for the benefit of your child. Although it may not always seem as if you all want the same things, it can be helpful to try and remember that everyone is there because they want your child to be safe and healthy.

It can be tempting to quickly answer someone back when you feel like you are being judged, especially if you think that judgement is unfair. Instead of instantly reacting, try to take a moment to think about what has been said and then respond as calmly and clearly as you can. You could say something like "I need a moment to think about that" or "I'm not sure what you mean, can you say that again, please?". If you are open and honest, it is easier for everyone present to realise what support you and your child might need, and to try and get this support put in place.

It is reasonable for professionals to have expectations of you while you are working with them and it reasonable for you to also have expectations of them. Making these expectations clear and regularly checking them will help to minimise misunderstandings and conflict. For example, if a meeting needs to be cancelled, you would hope for as much notice as possible and an explanation of why it has been cancelled, or if you cannot make a suggested date because it clashes with something else important, then you have a right to explain that.

It is easier to keep your relationship with any professionals positive and constructive if everyone stays respectful – even if they disagree. It is OK for you to say you disagree or that you see a situation differently. You can use phrases like: "I hear what you have said to me, but I do not agree because . . ." or "My understanding of the situation is different. I think . . ." If you know you have a difficult conversation coming, it can be helpful to role



play it with someone beforehand to practise saying what you want to get across.

Social workers will expect you to share information with them and usually there is the expectation that your child's school is made aware of what is happening so staff can support your child. You can ask about information sharing consent documents which should be in place so you know how different statutory agencies (like the police or social care) and other organisations/individuals (like a parenting worker or counsellor) will hold your data and what your rights are.

Being organised can help you feel in control. It's understandable that you might sometimes disagree with the professionals involved with you and your child – if everyone stays respectful then it is easier to remember you are all trying to ensure your child is safe and well.

# Trauma and the brain

Sexual violence and abuse is a type of trauma.

The word 'trauma' can be used to describe any event which:

- threatens a person's safety
- is unexpected or not normal in their experience
- is beyond their perceived ability to cope
- impacts on their daily life and functioning

Different people will experience different events as traumatic and what is traumatic for one person may not be for another. We all have different experiences of life and different ways of managing so it is impossible to say what will or will not be traumatic. Sometimes people will say you and your child should be able to "get over it" or that "it could have been worse" but that's not how our brains work. When our safety is threatened, it is natural and normal to find that challenging to cope with and for it to impact on how we manage everyday life. Anything which feels traumatic to us can be overwhelming.



## reptilian brain

Responsible for keeping us alive

## mammalian brain

Processing information through our senses

## prefrontal cortex

Responsible for thinking and reasoning

Very simply speaking, our brains can be divided into three parts: the reptilian brain, the mammalian brain and the prefrontal cortex or thinking brain. Each part serves a different function. The reptilian brain is responsible for keeping us alive. It makes sure we breathe and digest food without having to think (parasympathetic nervous system we mentioned earlier) and it takes over when our brain perceives we are in danger (sympathetic nervous system we mentioned earlier). The mammalian brain processes the information we get from the world around us through our senses (taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell) and the prefrontal cortex does all our thinking and reasoning.

When we are safe, the different parts of the brain work well together to help us make sense of the world from how we experience it. The thinking brain is in control, the mammal brain processes information from our senses and the reptilian brain just ticks over in the background, allowing our parasympathetic nervous system to keep our body functioning healthily without us having to remember to do things like breathe, swallow or blink etc.

When a person experiences a traumatic event, the sympathetic nervous system kicks in, meaning the reptilian brain takes over and the parts of the brain that manage our senses (the mammalian brain) and logical thinking (the prefrontal cortex) tend to be shut down. The reptilian brain is only concerned with survival and responds instinctively to danger – once the sympathetic nervous system is activated, there is not much of a chance of thinking or making decisions – responses to danger are just reactions.

Lots of people talk about feeling the urges to fight (for example push, kick, punch) or flight (putting physical distance between you and the person causing you harm by running away, for example). The reptilian brain can also cause a person to freeze (stay still and do nothing), flop (your body goes like a ragdoll) or friend (try to create a bond with the person causing harm to reduce the chances of further harm). These are the 5 Fs. For many people, including children, the options to fight a perpetrator or to run

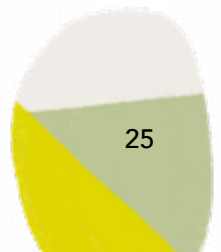




away are not possible. The perpetrator is probably bigger and stronger than them and they may well be in a place they cannot leave or, if they did leave, would mean they had nowhere else to go. Many people, when they experience sexual violence and abuse, will freeze, flop or friend. Understanding this might help you make sense of your child's responses to the perpetrator, the sexual violence and abuse and the situation they find themselves in now.

It is relevant for the present as well as the past because the reptile brain will keep going back to a successful survival tactic even when it is no longer needed. If a particular response works (it keeps you alive on that occasion), the brain will default to using that response again in any future traumatic situations. This is especially true if you experience repeated trauma, like a child who is sexually abused on a regular basis. If a child freezes each time they are abused, then the reptile brain gets into the habit of sending out the message to freeze when any situation seems similar to the abuse. It doesn't have to actually be similar, what is important is that the nervous system is triggered because it seems similar – it might be a similar time of day to when the child was assaulted, or in the same room as the abuse happened, or someone might have a similar aftershave or jumper to the perpetrator – all sorts of detail can lead to the nervous system triggering that message to freeze. This can make it very difficult for a child to cope because they still don't feel safe even though they actually are safe now. Although this is just the child's brain trying to keep the child safe, it is really unhelpful because the child's brain responds to any stressful situation in the same way so, for example, they may freeze when asked to read aloud or when someone else is being told off. This might mean they are getting into trouble, when their trauma responses have been triggered, which is not their fault.

The good news is that healthy human brains are really clever and can learn to let the reptile brain step back into the background again – all of the techniques mentioned on **pages 11-16** to help you cope, will also be helpful for your child. Any of these will help train their brain to allow the thinking part to be back in charge again.



Our brains respond to traumatic events in different ways. None of these responses are wrong. Whatever your child's brain did to make sure they survived is the best it could do. Your child can learn techniques to reduce the chances of being "triggered".

## **Guilt, shame and self-blame**

Children who have experienced the trauma of sexual violence and abuse often feel that they are in some way to blame or responsible for what happened to them. They may think that there was something they could have done to stop the sexual abuse happening or they may believe they did something which led to them being sexually abused. This may lead to feelings of guilt and shame, which are especially difficult feelings to manage. Our society does not make it easy to talk about sex in a healthy, open way and this can add to the struggles a child may have to cope with their feelings. Because even consensual sexual activity is often talked about as if it is shameful, then imagine how much worse it can feel if you have been sexually abused, assaulted or raped.

A child may also feel guilty about the impact of the incident, even though it was the result of the perpetrator's decisions and actions. They may feel that they have caused distress to their family or friends or even that they have caused problems for the perpetrator. All these different issues add to the difficulties children may have in speaking up about sexual violence and abuse. Being kind to them, and open to discussions about feelings can help them recognise it is ok to accept help. It might feel easier for a child to talk to someone who is separate from family/friends etc so counselling is a good option to encourage them to consider. Counselling gives a victim/survivor a space and time which is just for them, to talk about whatever feels most helpful to them.

It may take time, and lots of reassurance for your child to believe that they were really not in any way to blame for what the perpetrator did to them.

# Responses to trauma in children

## Re-living

Re-living covers trauma responses that involve the brain going through the experiences of trauma again and again as it tries to make sense of what happened. This might include nightmares, flashbacks (being awake but feeling like the traumatic incident is happening again), intrusive thoughts (negative or unhelpful thoughts connected to the traumatic incident that pop into the survivor's head, often without warning) and hallucinations or hearing voices (seeing things that are not there or hearing voices of people who are not there, usually saying negative or unhelpful things). These things can make a child feel scared and disorientated. Any of the techniques mentioned on **pages 11-16** can help your child reduce how often this sort of re-living event occurs.

## Avoidance

Avoidance is when a child tries to distance themselves from the feelings caused by the sexual violence and abuse. This might involve physical distancing by pushing away friends or family, or withdrawing into isolation. In older children it might include trying drugs, alcohol or self-harm in an effort to numb the feelings or replace difficult feelings with different ones. Avoidance can also mean a child refuses to deal with anything related to the sexual violence and abuse – they might refuse to talk to a police officer or social worker, not want to go back to a place near where it happened, or choose not to have specialist counselling because it makes it all feel “too real”. These are understandable responses to a traumatic situation and it is important to be patient and make sure your child knows they can take their time and ask for help when they feel ready for it.

## Heightened alertness

Trauma responses often involve feelings of anxiety which may be intense enough to lead to panic attacks. When the reptile part of their brain is triggered to take over, a child will stop feeling safe, and may also become

hyper-vigilant. They might be overly aware of everything going on around them, jumping at the slightest noise or movement even when they are in a place which should feel safe. This level of alertness is exhausting to maintain, and can also feel really difficult for other family members to cope with. If you notice this is happening, try to find a quiet time to talk to your child about how they feel when it happens and see if they have any suggestions for what you could try to do to stop it from happening, or reassure them if it does happen.

Unfortunately, many trauma responses can look like what families and carers, teachers and other professionals consider 'bad behaviour' and this can mean that children are punished for behaviours that they have little or no real control over. If a child is demonstrating these behaviours, the last thing they need is shouting or punishment. They need to hear a kind and comforting voice which can help them begin to feel safe and calm again. Only then will they be able to talk properly, listen carefully and carry on with their day. They will need some time to allow their nervous system to feel balanced again.

## **Dissociation**

Dissociation might look like being distracted, 'daydreaming', not concentrating or listening or 'zoning out'. Dissociation is a trauma response used when escape is impossible. The reptilian brain prepares the body for injury by slowing heart rate (to reduce blood loss in case of injury) and hormones are released to create a sense of calm, leading to a feeling of emotionlessness and numbness. If someone has experienced trauma, any stressful situation can trigger dissociation.

## **Freezing**

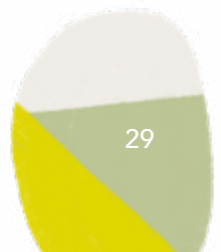
Freezing might look like defiance, refusing to follow instructions or 'rudeness'. This is the trauma response used by the reptilian brain to avoid serious injury or death and is a total physical inability to respond or move. If this response is triggered, the child is unlikely to be able to be cooperative. Because it is the reptile brain not the thinking brain which is causing the freezing, no matter how much anyone orders them or cajoles them, the child will not be able to respond properly until they feel safe again.



## Sensitisation

Being 'dramatic', over-reacting, 'kicking off', shouting or swearing could be signs of sensitisation. Sensitisation is the brain's way of staying alert to potential dangers that may be unexpected or unusual. Any random pattern of unpredictable traumas can cause excessive sensitivity to future stressors so that small things lead to large responses that do not seem proportional to what has happened in that moment. A tantrum or meltdown which seems totally out of proportion to the situation might be a sign that the child feels overwhelmed and the small thing which went wrong is simply the final straw.

Apart from getting into trouble for trauma responses which may look like bad behaviour, the trauma caused by sexual violence and abuse can affect a child's school life in other ways. Their academic performance might get worse if they struggle with concentration, or it might get better because school feels like a safe place and they are focusing on their work to keep their mind busy. Their friendships might fall apart because behaviour changes stop them from being such good company, or because friends treat them badly when they find out about the sexual violence and abuse. Their interaction with peers can also be affected in this way, especially if their experience of sexual violence and abuse becomes common knowledge; with older children in particular, social media can often mean lots of people finding out very quickly, and people are not always kind to victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse – often because they believe the myths we talked about at the start of this guide. For younger children, the development of their abilities to talk, listen properly and make sense of the world around them may be delayed which can make it harder for them to learn. Trauma can also make it harder for them to think, remember and make decisions, all of which can make school very challenging. The child may not be achieving the expected age-appropriate targets. They may have trouble concentrating and may be unable to focus on one thing. Intrusive thoughts may make doing schoolwork impossible which can lead to a lack of motivation to try, and then to punishments for incomplete work.



Children who have experienced the trauma of sexual violence and abuse may find it difficult to get on with other people. They may find it hard to trust people after what they have been through. They might become manipulative, overbearing, aggressive or bullying in order to get control of the relationship, or they might seem very passive and submissive. They may need help to understand boundaries, because all their boundaries have been broken by the abuser. They may change their personality to try to suit whoever they are with and start to seem fake. Friendships might become difficult for the child to manage. Adults, such as teachers and support staff, may find the child's behaviours challenging and see them as 'being naughty' and they may feel uncomfortable if the child is unable to understand and maintain boundaries with adults, for example by touching them.

Some trauma responses can look like 'bad behaviour'. It can be helpful for the adults in your child's life to understand that a gentle tone and kind words will help your child to feel safe so that they can be in control of their own behaviour again.

## Parenting techniques to try

Your child's behaviour, even when it is incredibly difficult to manage, is a normal response to an abnormal event. When someone experiences sexual violence and abuse, they have not had any power because someone else has been in control, so many behaviours are about trying to take back power and control. As a parent/carer, this is especially challenging to deal with as you are the one who makes decisions for your child and is 'in charge' but your child is likely to challenge this in a variety of ways.

As we look at some techniques you can try with your child, try to have realistic expectations of your child and your relationship, celebrate small victories and try not to take your child's difficulties personally. There are no quick fixes but things can get better. Consistent and clear boundaries will help this happen faster and ensure your family can keep improvements going.

Children tend to enjoy your time and attention and will often demand it at the most inconvenient times, like when you're on the phone or the toilet. When a child has experienced sexual violence and abuse, their demands for attention can either become more frequent and insistent or they may withdraw from you, both of which can be challenging to manage. Try setting aside time that is specifically for your child to spend time with you. As far as is reasonable (safe, affordable and legal) allow your child to make the decisions about what you do with your time together. Many children want to do things they enjoyed when they were younger and their priority is that they have you to themselves, without distractions. You could also try having designated 'family time' when you do something together without distractions. This could be eating together, playing a game as a family, watching a film or even listening to your child tell you about a game they are playing or the details of what's happening in their friendship group.

The words you use with your child can be incredibly powerful, if you say the wrong thing it is easy to hurt their feelings but your words and actions can really help to build their self-esteem and resilience. Praise is important for all of us and is especially effective when it is linked to something your child has had to try hard at. For example, saying “you worked really hard at that” or “you put so much effort into that” instead of “you’re good at that” shows them you know they have been trying and that it wasn’t just something that came naturally. Similarly, you could try showing your child that you have noticed changes in them and that you have recognised the behaviours you want to see, for example by saying “you went to bed really well last night, you said ‘good night’ and listened to your story” or “you were considerate when you called to let me know that you would be late home so that I didn’t worry about you”.

Boundaries are essential for children to feel safe. They will push boundaries and challenge you as a way to check the boundary is secure and that you are keeping them safe. This is a normal part of childhood, especially as children grow older, but it may be particularly challenging when your child has experienced any form of sexual violence and abuse. For example, if you set a bedtime but don’t maintain it, the message they get is that the boundary was not secure and no one really cared whether they went to bed or not. Most people are not natural rule-followers so putting boundaries in place will take time. Remember, try not to take behaviour personally. If you are a safe adult for your child, you are most likely to see the worst of their behaviours because they believe it is OK to let you see how they feel – they know you will still love them.

When your boundaries are tested, you could try pausing to think about what has happened and how you want to respond to it. For example, you could say “I don’t like how this conversation is going and I’m starting to feel angry and upset so I’d like to spend a little time on my own”. When you and your child have calmed down, you can speak about their behaviour. For example, you might say “when you told me to shut up, I felt like you didn’t care about what I was trying to say. Do you understand why I might have felt like that?”.

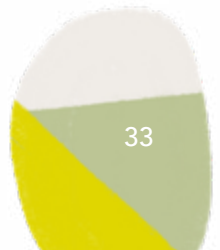




You could try showing why the boundary is necessary for you. For example, you could say "I'm finding it too loud in here for me at the moment and I need everyone to quieten down" instead of "you're too loud". This shows you are reinforcing your personal boundary by reminding your child and other family members of acceptable noise levels without making it seem like they are the whole cause of the issue.

It is important to try to be predictable in the behaviours you expect from your child and only use punishments for behaviours that are always unacceptable; only use punishment in a consistent and proportional way. Try to be patient and accept that sometimes things will go wrong, just as they do in adult relationships, but you can always get back on track. Self-care is especially important to help you feel well enough to manage when your child is challenging.

**Your child's behaviour, even when it is incredibly difficult to manage, is a normal response to an abnormal event. It is crucial that you hold the boundaries that you set, as this helps your child feel safe.**



## Managing emotions

When children have experienced trauma, sometimes it can feel like their emotions are unmanageable, both for them and for others around them. Lots of families and carers will say: "I just want my child to be happy" but that can be a big ask when your child is struggling with difficult thoughts and feelings. You may feel tempted to not talk about the difficult emotions and avoid having to acknowledge them because you don't want your child to feel more upset than they already do. However, talking about emotions can be really helpful for children and enable them to deal with difficult feelings. It is also important to help children to process those feelings so they do not keep them bottled up inside and carry them into their later life.

If your child is finding it difficult to talk about their feelings or they are reluctant to talk at all, you can use TED questions to help them focus what they want to say or to start a conversation.

- Tell me . . . ("tell me how you are feeling", "tell me something good that happened today")
- Explain . . . ("explain how you're feeling", "explain what has happened today")
- Describe . . . ("describe how your body feels right now", "describe what your feelings look like")

Listening with empathy is also a good way of supporting your child to balance their emotions. Empathy means trying to imagine what another person is feeling. For example, if your child has had a difficult day at school and has fallen out with a friend, it might be tempting to say: "don't worry, you've got lots of other friends" or "what did you do to make them say that?" which may make your child feel like you don't understand how upset they are and that you think it was their fault anyway. Instead, if you say "you must feel so upset, you usually get on really well and now it feels like you two aren't friends anymore. What do you think might help?"

you are showing your child you understand how they feel and that their feeling is a reasonable response to what happened. They are much more likely to feel able to continue talking to you in an honest way if they feel understood in this way.

Sometimes it is best to say nothing and allow your child to get everything out. This can be very difficult if they are shouting and swearing at you so try to remember that it is not really about you, They are doing this because you are safe (you will still love them or care for them even after they have said terrible things) and they are saying to you the things they can't say to the person who has harmed them. Once they have said everything they need do, you could try asking what feels different to them now that they have said those things out loud.

**Helping your child to name their emotions and to talk about how they are feeling can make it easier for them to cope.**

## Developing resilience and confidence

Resilience is about being able to recover from tough times and to manage difficulties or challenges – some people call it bounce-backability because it is about how well we can bounce back from life's difficulties.

If you are resilient, it does not mean that you don't feel anything or that nothing bothers you, it means that you have a full range of emotions and you are able to manage them and live a full life. Being confident means you believe in yourself and feel assured that you can rely on yourself or others. People who are confident in themselves, their choices and their relationships are often much more resilient because they know they are a good person who is loved and supported.

Being confident and resilient doesn't happen quickly or easily. It will be an ongoing process for you and your child, but it is worth persevering with as it will help your child face difficult times in the future and into adulthood. It will also help you to take good care of yourself as a parent.

The parenting techniques mentioned earlier, including thinking about the words you use and spending time with your child, are good ways to build resilience and self-confidence. You may find that your child ignores you or dismisses what you are saying but that does not mean that they are not hearing what you say and taking it in. For children who have experienced trauma, it can sometimes be very difficult to hear good things about themselves and to hear that other people think good things about them. You could try using some of the following phrases.

When things go right, you could say to your child:

*You've worked really hard.*

*You are helpful.*

*Good thinking!*

*You figured it out!*

*You must have been practising.*

When things go wrong, you could say to your child:

*You are on the right track.*

*You are really improving.*

*It's OK, we all make mistakes.*

*You can try again tomorrow.*

*You can learn from your mistakes.*



Empowerment is helping your child to feel like they have some control and power in their lives. To empower your child, you could use the following phrases:

*You can say no. Your choices matter. I believe you. I trust you.  
Your body is yours.*

Below are some activities you could try with your child to help build their self-confidence.

Write an imaginative story about each other that includes the two of you as characters (plus other family members if you like). Anything can happen in the story and you can include all the positive things you know about each other as part of the tale. For example, you may have your child being kind or careful and yourself being organised to reflect your real-life positive qualities. Once you have finished the stories you can read them together or even act them out.

If your child asks for something, such as a new mobile phone or some new clothes, ask them to pitch to you why they think they should be allowed to have it, like they are making an advert to promote themselves. For example, they may focus on how they can be trusted to look after a new phone or what they know about online safety. This can be presented to you as a speech, a poster or as a performance.

Set up your own 'Our Home Has Talent' show and have your child (plus other family members if you like) create a performance that shows off their talents and abilities. For example, they may make up a dance, read aloud to you or show you how to do something on a game. At the end of the performance, give positive feedback on what was good and give one point to work on. You can then swap so they judge you in a performance.

Helping your child know what they do well, and what you like about them will build their confidence and help them cope when life gets difficult.

## Having difficult conversations

There may be times when you need to share information with your child or tell them something that feels difficult, such as an update from the police about an investigation they are a witness in or about behaviours you have noticed that might feel embarrassing to mention. Talking to your child about difficult or awkward things will never feel totally easy but these conversations are important so it is essential that you try your best to make them feel manageable for you and your child. Keeping things from your child is not always for the best and may leave them with lots of unanswered questions which they dwell on because they don't feel it's ok to ask you. You can use the guidelines below as a way to start and structure a difficult conversation. They can also be used as a basis for any conversations you might need to have with people in your support network about what has happened.

Before the difficult conversation, it can be helpful to think about the following:

- **What outcome do you want?**  
Do you want someone to understand some information you want to give them? Do you want someone to change their behaviours? Do you want someone to help you to achieve something or to support you to manage a problem?
- **What barriers are there to being able to communicate properly?**  
Is it difficult to get quiet time with the person you need to speak to? Are you worried about a hostile reaction that might be dangerous? Will the other person be open to having a conversation with you?
- **What strengths do you have?**  
Are you able to explain clearly what you want to say? Are you able to show the other person that you are responsible and sensible? Can you show that you are aware that you need help and you are asking for that support?
- **Who can help you if the topic is really difficult?**  
Is there a trusted person you can talk to before speaking with the person you need to? Is there anyone you can practise the conversation with? Is there anyone who knows the person you need to speak to really well who can advise you on how to approach them?

When you have planned what it is you want to say and thought about the barriers to communication and the strengths you have, you can use these tips to have the conversation itself.

Before you go to the other person, remember the tricks to keep your sympathetic nervous system calm. Try some controlled breathing into your belly, for example.

Let the person know you need to speak to them at some point within a given timeframe and a basic idea of the topic. This means they have an opportunity to prepare themselves, which might mean they are less resistant or defensive. You could say something like: "I need to speak to you about something important before bedtime".

Have the conversation in a neutral place that the other person is able to leave if they want to. For example, speak in the kitchen at home rather than someone's bedroom. You might need to make sure other people in your home know you need privacy.

Use something the person will already know about as a way to start the conversation. For example, you may say: "You may have noticed I have been quiet lately" or "Do you remember I told you about . . ." If the topic is complicated, share the information in small chunks rather than trying to explain everything in great detail straight away. If the other person interrupts you, you can say that it would be easier to let you speak and then you'll try to answer their questions.

If the other person asks you questions you can't answer or that seem to be judgemental, you can say: "This is difficult for me to talk about and I need some time to think about what you've said".

You may need to re-visit the conversation if it is a complicated issue.

**Avoiding talking about difficult topics is unlikely to make the situation better for anyone. Having a plan of how you can approach a difficult conversation can help you to feel more in control of what is being said.**

# Talking about sex and sexual abuse

The idea of teaching children about sex or talking to them about sex can make people feel very uncomfortable. They may think that children are too young to know about sex or that it may make them want to try sexual acts if they know about them. Speaking to your child and answering their questions in an age-appropriate way will not be harmful to them and it will not encourage them to engage in sexual acts. In fact, being able to talk openly with your child about issues connected to sex is more likely to improve your relationship with them and to mean they wait longer before having a sexual relationship. Young victims/survivors have told us how much difference it would have made to them if their parents or teachers had been able to talk to them comfortably about sex and relationships. When children are informed about healthy relationships and topics like consent, it makes it more likely that they can recognise perpetrator behaviour and more likely that they will feel able to talk to you if something bad happens. Young victims/survivors of sexual violence and abuse say that if their parents and teachers had talked more openly about sex related topics in an honest way, they would have more easily understood that what was happening to them was wrong, and then they would have been able to ask for support earlier.

## Use teachable moments

It is never too early to start talking to your child about their bodies and boundaries. 'Teachable moments' are times when the door is open for a conversation to take place. This might include talking about privacy and bodies at bath time or when changing a younger sibling's nappy, talking about where babies come from when you see a pregnant woman or talking with older children about relationships and privacy when you see representations of romantic or sexual relationships in the media.

## Keep the conversation going

Speaking to your child about sex should not be a one off 'birds and bees talk' when they are a teenager. If you wait until this point, they will already have collected information from their friends, from the media and from online pornography but will have had no one to reliably correct that





information or help them process it. This means that many teenagers, whose parents have not spoken to them in healthy ways about sex and relationships, have really distorted views. Some of them are shaped by unhelpful gender stereotypes, some are influenced by things they have heard other people talk about because they didn't realise those people were wrong, and some are formed by pornography they have seen. Taken altogether, these can lead to a very unhealthy and incorrect expectation of what sex might be like.

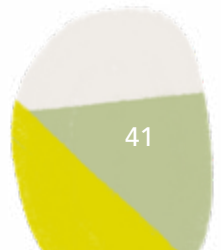
Open communication at an age appropriate level will help your family develop healthy relationships, and will also make it easier for your child to ask more questions in the future. Creating that open and honest environment takes time, but if your child knows you are ready to listen to them when they need to talk, they are less likely to keep difficult thoughts and feelings hidden inside.

### **Use the correct name for genitals**

Lots of people use nicknames for genitals with children. For example, they will say 'winkie' or 'willy' instead of penis and 'flower' or 'noonoo' instead of vagina. We don't do this with any other body parts, we don't have nicknames for our hands or legs. Not using the correct names is another way of making it seem to children like they cannot talk about those parts of their bodies. From a health and safeguarding perspective, children knowing and using the words 'penis' and 'vagina' means they can tell healthcare professionals and trusted adults clearly when they are experiencing pain or when someone has touched them inappropriately.

### **Stick to the facts**

It is much easier to give children factual information at an age-appropriate rate than to make up stories or to dodge questions. This does not mean you have to tell them everything at once, but inventing explanations will only lead to problems later when you have to backtrack and share the reality. Speaking factually and honestly is also a good way to manage feelings of embarrassment – although it can feel difficult, it will get easier as time goes on and your family will benefit.



## **Explain the difference between secrets and privacy**

Secrets are used by perpetrators as a way to silence children so it is important to avoid using the word 'secret' to help your child understand that secrets are things they really need to tell you about. Instead, you could talk about surprises or about things being private. For example, a present you don't want your child to reveal can be a surprise and time spent in the bathroom is private, neither need to be secrets.

## **Reinforce their body boundary**

It is very empowering for everyone, including children, to feel that they can say 'no' to things that they do not like. Letting your child know they can be assertive and refuse unwanted or unsafe touch will help them have the confidence to do so. You can help them come up with phrases to use, such as "don't do that, I don't like it" and, if they are ignored "I have already said I don't like that, stop." and then let them know they can leave the situation if they are able to. A good way of introducing this idea is to let them choose whether or not to hug or kiss relatives goodbye – a child should not be made to hug or kiss anyone if they do not want to.

## **Let your child know they can leave a situation**

It is important that you let your child know they are allowed to leave a situation if they feel uncomfortable and that they are allowed to talk to you about those feelings. They should not feel that they must be polite and stay somewhere or with someone if physical contact feels unsafe or is unwanted or if conversations are making them feel uncomfortable. They must know they will not be punished if they need to leave a situation that is causing them discomfort. If your child is away from you, make sure they know how they can contact you or which trusted adult can contact you for them. For example, if something happens at school, leaving the situation would involve going to a teacher who can deal with what has happened and then let you know. You might want to have a code your older child can text you if they want to leave a friend's house. For example, "Miss you xx" might really mean "I want to leave, please phone me and tell me I have to come home and come and get me". For older children, let them

know that they can always call you or someone in their support network, no matter what is going on or where they are, and while there might be consequences for some behaviours, you will help them leave any situation that feels unsafe.

Open and honest conversations about sex and relationships are crucial to safeguard your child.

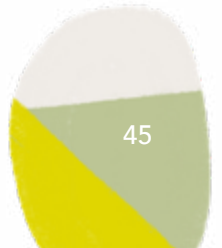
We hope that you have found this guide helpful. Please do not hesitate to ask your Rape Crisis worker if you have any questions or would like further information about any of the topics raised in this guide.

Above all, remember that taking care of yourself is as important as taking care of your child. When you are well and coping, you can more easily support your child to be well and coping.

## NOTES



# NOTES



## NOTES





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