



# PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

a guide for parents



# FOREWORD

by the Northern Ireland Sex Offender  
Strategic Management Committee (NISOSMC)

Nowadays we are aware of the horrors of child sexual abuse. But we may know less about how child abuse occurs, how to recognise the warning signs, or even how to avoid the most common dangers. Sometimes there is the perception that the greatest risk always comes from registered sex offenders. In reality the vast majority of sexual abuse of children is carried out by people known to the victim and individuals who have often not been reported or convicted. Despite this, the public does need to be reassured that convicted sex offenders are being assessed and managed in the community and this booklet has been launched to co-incide with new multi agency assessment and risk management procedures which are described in a section in the back.

Recent years have seen the development of new legislation and interagency practices designed to ensure that our children are protected from those convicted of sex offences.

The agencies in Northern Ireland began to work together on this in 1998 and have now developed clear procedures for the assessment and management of sex offenders and those who pose a risk to children.

The agencies recognise there are genuine fears in the community about sex abuse and at times misunderstanding and misconceptions of the risk that sex offenders may pose. We hope that this booklet will help address those concerns and give parents and carers good practical advice about protecting their children in a range of settings.



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Chair of NISOSMC which comprises

**Police Service of Northern Ireland**  
**Probation Board for Northern Ireland**  
**Northern Ireland Prison Service**  
**Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts**  
**Northern Ireland Housing Executive**  
**Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety**  
**Department of Education**  
**Northern Ireland Office**  
**NSPCC (Northern Ireland)**

# CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

**who might commit it,  
and how to keep children safe**

Raising children today is not an easy task. We all know that there are dangers in the world and that we must warn children and give them ways to keep safe. Yet none of us wants children to live in fear or to lose trust in people.

We are all aware of the danger to children from paedophiles (people who have a sexual preference for children). However, many of us know little about those child sex abusers who may have sexual relationships with adults and have children of their own. It is hard to believe that someone we know might abuse a child. The idea of anyone - man, woman or teenager - sexually abusing a child causes anger, sadness, and outrage. We hear about the high profile paedophiles from the TV and newspapers. But most sex abusers are not strangers. They live in our communities, in our families and may even be someone we know and love. So, if we want to protect our children, we need as much information as possible about child sex abusers and what to do if we are concerned.

Children also need to know how to get help in case anyone, known or unknown, tries to harm them. Fortunately, the vast majority of children will never be abused by anyone. Most people love and care for children and would never harm them in any way. Our child protection record in Northern Ireland and the UK

is actually quite good compared with many other countries. But any child sexual abuse is completely and totally unacceptable and hopefully this booklet will help keep our children safe.

## **Who are the abusers?**

### **Different kinds of people sexually abuse children:**

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

Child sex abusers are highly manipulative. Be wary if anyone is more interested in your child than in you or always wants to get your child alone.

- In a research study, KIDSCAPE found that a large number of male sex abusers find victims by offering to baby-sit.

### Why do they do it?

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

These abusers see media images of monster abusers and don't recognise themselves. They feel OK because they kid themselves into believing the abuse does no harm, or even that it's good for the child. Sometimes flashes of reality get through and they become depressed. They push guilt away, often blaming others, including the child.

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

### How do abusers control children?

Child abuse is rarely a single incident or event. Naturally all parents fear for their children when something horrible and unforgivable happens. But in order to

protect children, we need to know that most abusers form a relationship with a child - a relationship which harms the child and often makes the child feel responsible and unable to tell. Secrecy is the foundation and children are trapped before they know what has happened.

### Abusers may:

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

"I thought he was the answer to my dreams. A lovely man who adored my kids. He always took my son out alone to "do man's things" he said. When my son told me that Tony was abusing him, I could hardly believe it."

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

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

### **Abusers will try to find out:**

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

punished at home, to be lonely, family problems, to be unloved.

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

### **WARNING SIGNS**

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

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

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

# HOW ABUSERS KEEP CHILDREN FROM TELLING

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

**THE ABUSER says..... You're special or talented.**

***THE CHILD thinks..... He gives me treats and takes me out. He got me in the team.***

**THE ABUSER says..... Your parents know all about this.**

***THE CHILD thinks..... Dad/mum told me to be good for the babysitter, doctor, aunt.***

**THE ABUSER says..... I love you.**

***THE CHILD thinks..... She's mum and she loves me. She won't hurt me - mums don't.***

**THE ABUSER says..... Do you want to play.**

***THE CHILD thinks..... Yes, please. I love dare games!***

**THE ABUSER says..... You wanted to play this game.**

***THE CHILD thinks..... It's my fault.....***

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

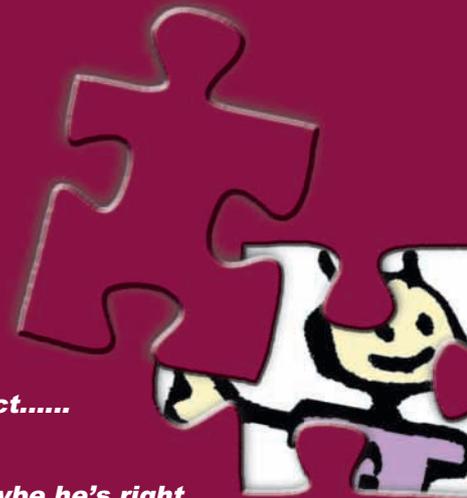
***THE CHILD thinks..... I should not have taken it - now no one can know.***

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

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

**THE ABUSER says..... You could have said "No".**

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



# WHAT MAKES CHILDREN VULNERABLE?

Abusers give various reasons about how they choose their victims. Some say they prefer girls or boys, or a particular colour of eyes or hair or children of a certain age. They may target one child in a family because the child is likely to keep a secret. Some also say they look for things which make it easy to get children to go along with the abuse and to keep quiet. They may seek out children who are:

- too young to tell
- innocent and trusting
- curious and friendly
- looking for attention
- lacking confidence and self esteem
- unhappy
- lonely
- vulnerable because of school or home problems
- disabled or unable to communicate

We need to find out as much as we can about the carers we leave our children with and make sure they have been thoroughly checked out. We also need to be aware that our children could be at risk from someone we know and love. As parents we can best protect our children by knowing about the dangers and by helping children to know what to do and where to go for help.

## **Leaving children in the care of others**

A good organisation will welcome questions about their activities and the safety of their environment. All organisations should have a child protection policy, including a statement on, and guidelines about, keeping children safe.

### **Are the staff and volunteers suitable to work with children?**

All staff and volunteers should go through a proper recruitment process which includes interviews and references; and where appropriate, police checks.

### **Is there a written code of behaviour?**

All organisations should have a written code of behaviour, which outlines good practice when working with children. An environment which allows oppressive behaviour such as bullying, shouting, racism and sexism is not acceptable.

### **How does the organisation manage staff and volunteers?**

There should be someone in charge who supervises staff and volunteers.

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

- An abuser

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

### **Do they offer regular training to staff and volunteers?**

Apart from skills training, all workers should have training in child protection and health and safety.

### **How can children and their parents or carers voice their concerns?**

Organisations should tell you where to go and what to do if you or your child have any worries.

### **Does the organisation have a health and safety policy?**

Find out if there is a leader qualified in first aid; that there is a first aid box; and that the premises have passed fire regulations.

### **What are the arrangements when older children go on outings?**

You should be informed of arrangements - including transport to and from- for every outing no matter how long or short, and your consent should be requested.

## **We can teach our children**

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

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

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

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

# WHEN DO YOU LET THEM OUT?

“The first time I let my little boy cross the road alone, I was so nervous. He’ll never know how relieved I was when he came rushing in to tell me of his success or how I hid in the bushes and watched his every move!”

Parents are concerned about when they should first allow children to venture out in pairs or alone. One mother said that she would allow her children to be independent ‘next year’. She said her only problem was that when next year came, it was always too soon. There is no ‘right’ age for all children. Much will depend upon your own circumstances, where you live, and how mature your children are. It is a decision that parents will make best.

KIDSCAPE asked 4000 parents about giving children independence. Most parents allowed children:

- from age 9 to cross local roads to run short errands
- from age 11 to use local transport in daylight hours
- from age 12 to go with a friend to a cinema or shopping unsupervised for several hours during the day
- from age 15 to be out with friend during evening hours, coming home before eleven p.m.

All the parents questioned said they worried when first giving children independence and continued to worry a little no matter how old their children were!

## Out alone

Having decided about when to give more freedom and independence to our children, here are a few helpful guidelines. They should:

- stay with friends or with a group and not wander off alone.
- walk to and from school with a friend or a group.
- beware if they are in a shopping centre, arcade or disco and someone offers them money to do a job or errand. Don’t do it - it could be a trick.
- go towards people - into a shop or even knock on the door of a house - if they think that they are being followed.
- always tell you where they’re going and when they’ll be back.

## Talk to them about:

- not talking to or going with strangers, including people they’ve only met for a short time. Some children take people out of the category of stranger very quickly. It might help to make a list of who our children CAN go with without checking with you first.

- a family code word. Tell your children that if anyone tries to collect them for you, the person will always know the code word. "No Code, no Go."
- yelling and running if anyone tries to grab them or pull them into a car, or to entice them away. Practice with them.
- being wary of public toilets and to go in with a friend, if possible. Get out quickly if anyone approaches them.
- always carrying a travel pass or phone card so they can get home or call you. Teach them how to make a reverse charge call.
- having your permission to break any rule to keep themselves safe.
- to know safe places on their daily walks or routes they can go into if they are being followed.
- to be alert if someone is following them or trying to get them on their own - alert the driver or guard. Never leave the station or bus if someone is following them. Stay on and wait for assistance or ring the police or home.
- to be aware when walking of the people around them -wearing a personal stereo cuts down on alertness. If they think they are being followed, go into a shop or any place with people. Do not go into isolated places.
- never to go up to a car to give directions to someone. Just pretend not to hear and keep going.
- to make a loud fuss to attract help if someone tries to lure them to a quiet, isolated place by threatening them while they are still in a public place. It is safer to stay in a public place.

## Travelling

When your children are old enough to travel on their own, work out with them some safety suggestions such as:

- to travel in a train carriage where there are other people.
- to carry enough money for their return trip and never spend it on anything else.
- to work out with you what to do if they miss their train or bus. How would they get home? Is there someone they could call?

Because children and young people are often embarrassed to draw attention to themselves, it is vital that we help them work out strategies in advance of anything happening. Otherwise they might freeze and not be able to think if they are confronted by someone out to harm them.

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

# WHAT DO I DO IF I SUSPECT ABUSE?

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

## Talking to your child

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

## What should you do?

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

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

You may be worried about what might happen if you ring the authorities. Remember that they are concerned to help children. Most studies show that children have been glad of help from police and social services, even if it may have been frightening at first. Depending on what has happened, the police and social services may be involved. This may be the most difficult thing you've ever had to do. But remember that it takes a lot of courage for children to tell about abuse. If nothing happens and no action is

taken, children may never feel safe enough to tell us again.

## What happens next?

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

## What can you do to help your child?

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

# ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF SEX OFFENDERS

## **Sex Offenders Act 1997**

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

## **Multi Risk Assessment and Management of Sex Offenders**

Using risk assessment/risk management procedures, 6 Area Sex Offender Risk Management Committees, reporting to the Northern Ireland Sex Offender Strategic Management Committee (NISOSMC), assess the risk that sex offenders pose. If necessary, a risk management plan is devised and arrangements put in place to monitor the offender. Cases of very high risk offenders, are referred to the NISOSMC for consideration.

Agencies represented on the Area and Strategic Committees include:-

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

The risk that sex offenders pose is initially carried out by the police using a standardised assessment method. Further consideration is given to higher risk offenders by the relevant Area Committee. Where necessary, the Area Committee will formulate an interagency risk management plan. If dealing with a very high risk offender, the plan will be referred to the NISOSMC.

Offenders will be encouraged to co-operate with this assessment and risk management process. If the offender does not co-operate and is believed to pose a serious risk to the community, the NISOSMC will consider if it is necessary to make information available to sections of the wider community that will help parents to protect their children.

**The NISOSMC would like to acknowledge the assistance of Michele Elliott of KIDSCAPE and Dan Norris MP in providing much of the content for this leaflet from Protecting Our Children - A guide for parents© which was originally published in 1999 with the support of the Home Office.**

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

**Funding for this revision has been made available by PSNI and Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs)**

**NISOSMC reprinted April 2004**

## **WHERE TO GET HELP**

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

### **CHILDLINE 0800 1111 (24 hours)**

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

### **CHILDREN'S LAW CENTRE 028 9024 5704**

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

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

**Offers free child protection leaflets with a SAE and a telephone helpline for parents of bullied children  
[www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)**

### **NEXUS INSTITUTE**

**Counselling and Support organisation for anyone over the age of 17 years who has been abused  
[www.nexusinstitute.org](http://www.nexusinstitute.org) 028 9032 6803**

### **NSPCC NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION HELPLINE**

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

### **PARENTS ADVICE CENTRE**

**Helpline 028 9023 8800  
[belfast@pachelp.org](mailto:belfast@pachelp.org) [www.pachelp.org](http://www.pachelp.org)**

### **POLICE SERVICE of NORTHERN IRELAND 028 9065 0222**

**SAMARITANS 08457 90 90 90 (24 hours) Helpline for anyone in distress**

### **YOUNG WITNESS SUPPORT SCHEME NSPCC (NI)**

**Antrim Courthouse Tel: 028 9448 7533  
Belfast Tel: 028 9024 0847 Foyle Tel: 028 7126 6789**

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

### **STOP IT NOW! UK & IRELAND**

**Provides a helpline if you suspect that someone you know  
is sexually abusing a child or if you are worried about your  
own thoughts or behaviour towards children  
Freephone 0808 1000 900  
[www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)**

