

The logo features a square background with a geometric, low-poly pattern in shades of blue, purple, and green. The text is white and positioned in the lower-left corner of the square.

Centre of
expertise
on child
sexual abuse

The scale and nature of child sexual abuse: Overcoming the challenges in practice

Dr Natasha Sabin

Practice Improvement Advisor

13 December 2023

The CSA Centre

We are the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre). We want children to be able to live **free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse**.

Our aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response.

We are a **multi-disciplinary team** that works closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector.



What we will cover today



The scale and nature of child sexual abuse



The challenges in practice



What we can ALL do about it

Looking after yourself

Sexual abuse can be difficult to think about and talk about. Thinking about it and talking about it will affect us all in **different ways**, at **different times**.

It is important that we...

- Be aware of the feelings and experiences of other delegates
- Be kind to ourselves (personally and professionally)
- Respect each other's learning journey

“I don’t know why it started and I don’t know why it stopped...I still don’t know really, no one ever spoke with me about it”.

(Survivor, aged 41)

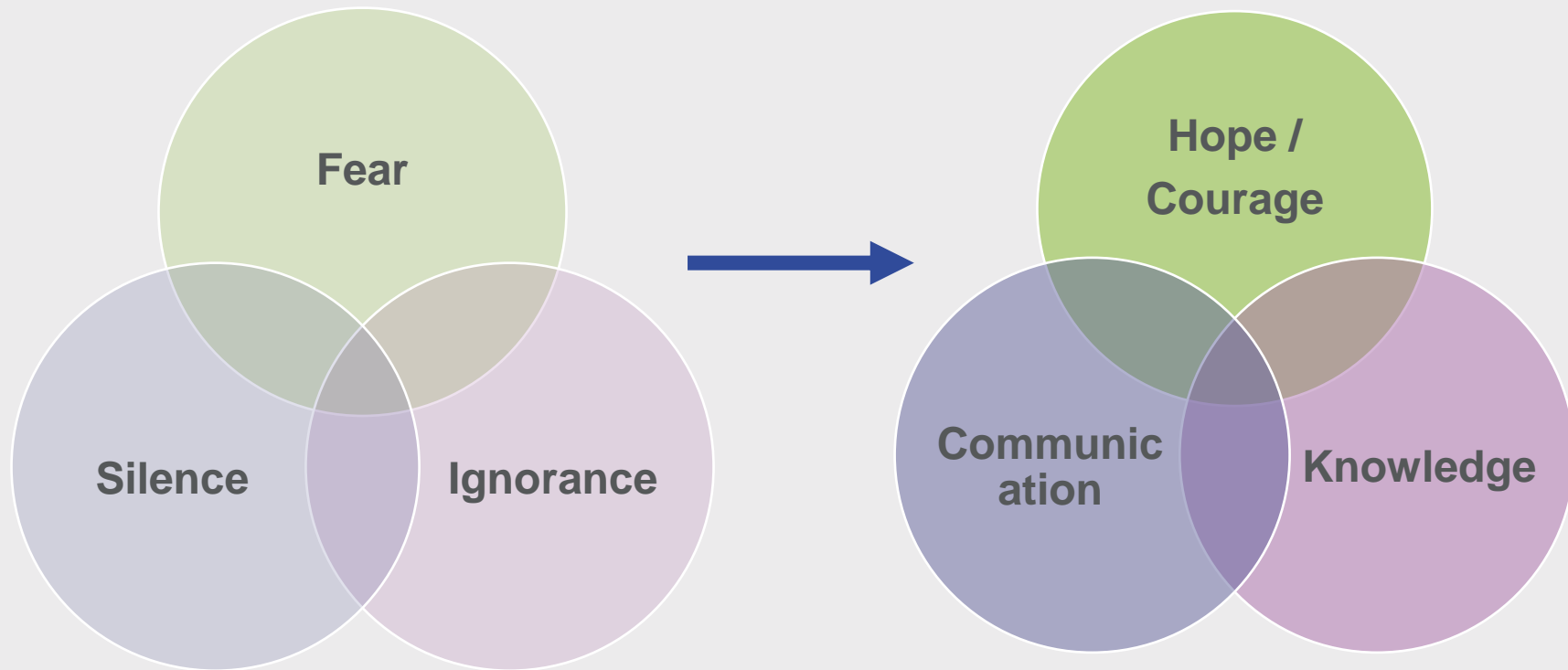


We, as professionals, are being held back by...



When we need hope, communication and knowledge

7



The scale and nature of child sexual abuse

What *do* we know?

Over one in ten children are sexually abused by the age of 16



This is much higher
for girls than for
boys

Understanding the different contexts of child sexual abuse offending

Child sexual abuse within
the family environment

Child sexual abuse through
attack by an unknown person

Child sexual abuse through
trusted relationships outside
the family environment

Child sexual abuse through
a personal connection

Child sexual abuse through
an intermediary

Child sexual abuse arranged
and perpetrated for payment

Child sexual abuse through
online interaction

Child sexual abuse through
groups and networks

Child sexual abuse through
viewing, sharing or
possessing images

Most common contexts of abuse

The most serious and repeated offences are more likely to be committed by **known persons**



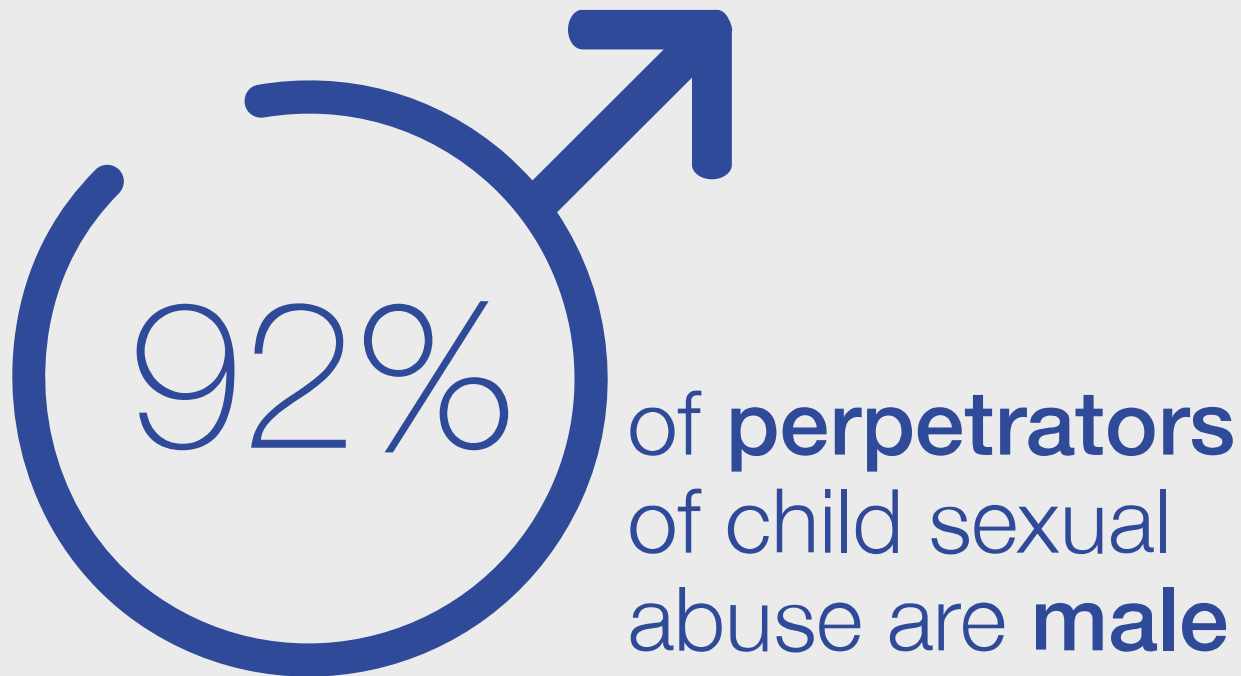
For boys, abuse by authority figures is more common



For girls, abuse by family members is more common

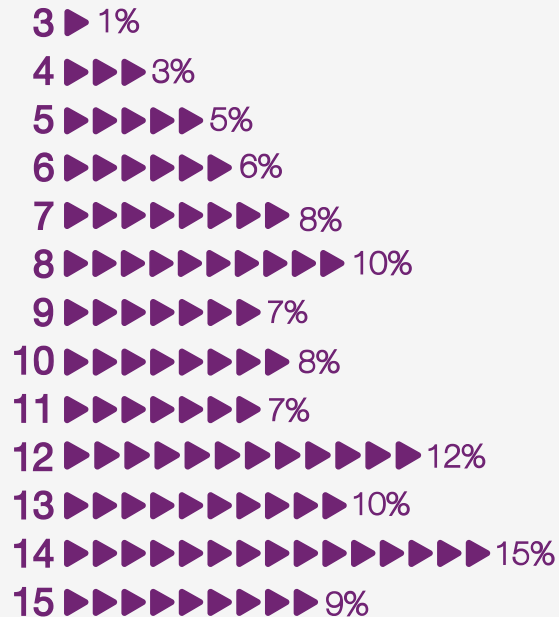
Sex of those who have sexually harmed

12



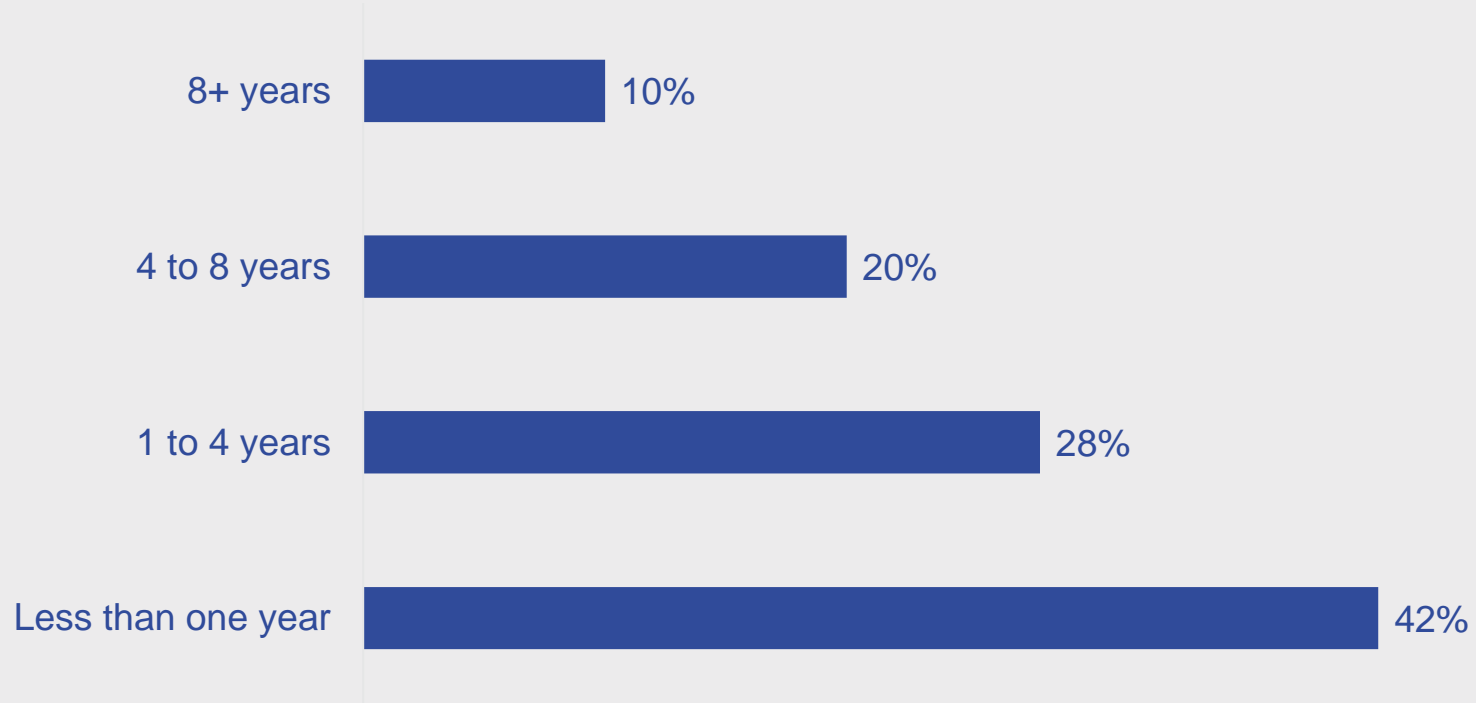
Age of victims

Age when abuse started



- **1 in 3** reported start of abuse before the **age of 9**
- **1 in 3** said it started between ages **9 to 12**
- **1 in 3** said it started between **13 to 15**
- We are **missing 16-17** year olds in this data
- Emerging evidence of abuse of **very young children**

Duration of rape / penetrative abuse



Vulnerabilities in the child's environment

Factors which increase the opportunities for abuse to occur include:

- Children who live in conditions of neglect are **five times more likely** to be sexually abused than those with no experience of neglect.
- Children who spend time in residential care are **four times more likely** to be (or have been) sexually abused than those who live only in a family home.
- Disabled children are **at least twice as likely** as non-disabled children to be targeted by abusers.



Vulnerabilities in the child's environment



Factors which increase the pressure on families and can undermine their ability to protect children. Including:

- Children who live in a household with someone misusing alcohol or drugs are **three times more likely** to be sexually abused than children not exposed to parental substance misuse.
- **Over a half of children** who are sexually abused also experience other forms of child abuse, most frequently emotional abuse or witnessing domestic abuse.

Far more children are sexually abused than services identify

Child sexual abuse in 2020/21: Trends in official data
csacentre.org.uk

An iceberg graphic with a dark blue base and a lighter blue, faceted top. The top of the iceberg is above the water line, while the much larger base is submerged. Horizontal dashed lines align with the data points on the right.

2,600 children on a child protection plan due to child sexual abuse
(England and Wales)

46,000 children assessed at risk of sexual abuse*
(England)

89,000 child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police
(England and Wales)

500,000

children estimated to experience child sexual
abuse every year**

Sources: Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes, 2020/21; Department for Education, Characteristics of Children in Need, 2020/21. * Includes assessments in child sexual abuse and exploitation. ** Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence estimates by age group (Radford et al, 2011, Childhood abuse and neglect in the UK today) and the Office for National Statistics 2020 population estimates. Please note: numbers rounded to the nearest hundred.

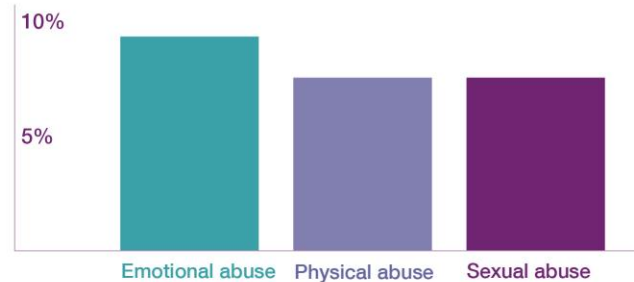
Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is just as common as other forms of childhood abuse

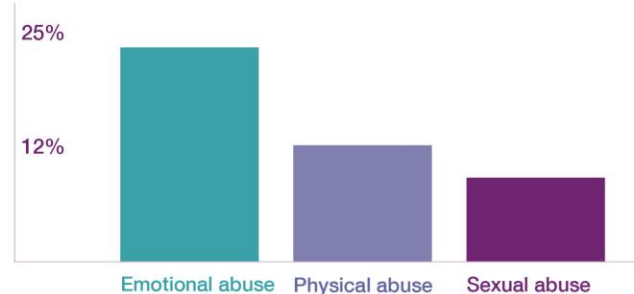
Child sexual abuse in 2020/21: Trends in official data
[csacentre.org.uk](https://www.csacentre.org.uk)

But concerns of sexual abuse are far less likely to be identified and named

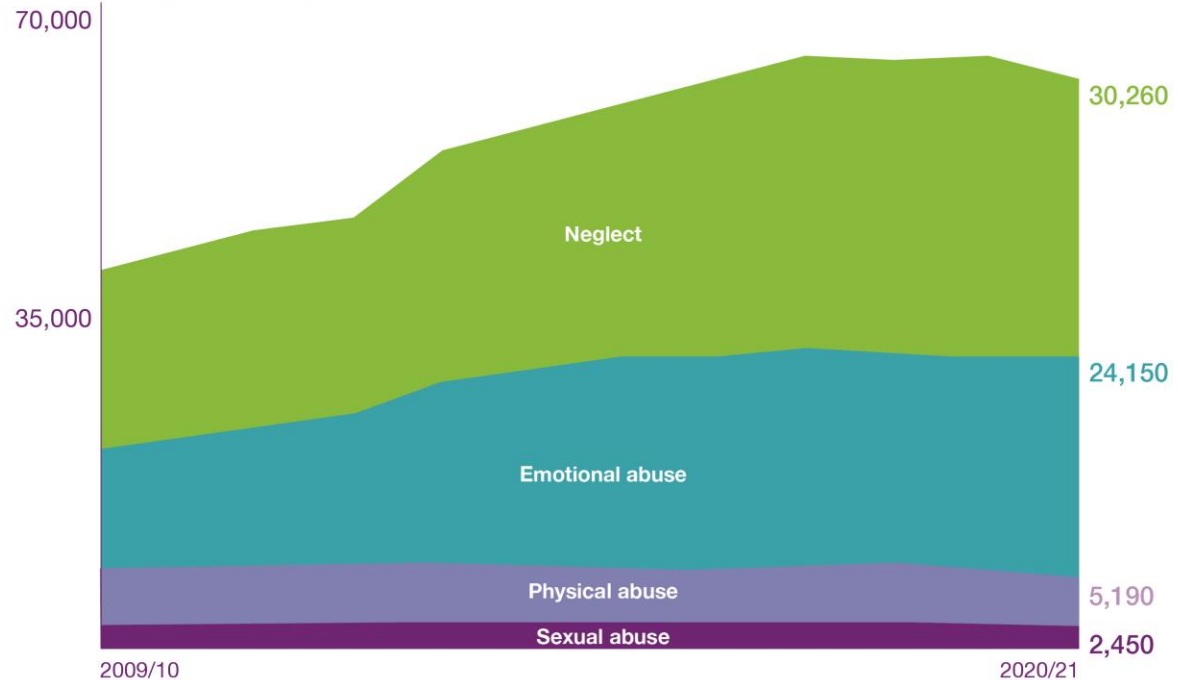
Levels of child abuse identified in surveys



Levels of child abuse identified in child protection assessments



Child protection plans by forms of abuse

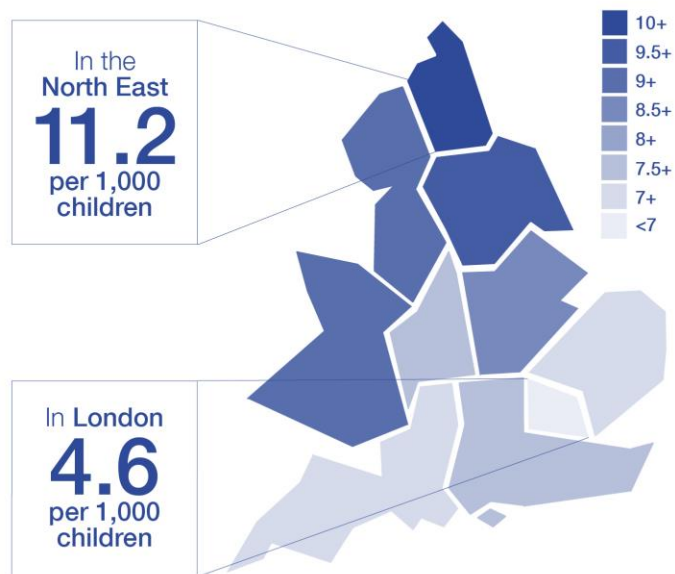


Where children live matters

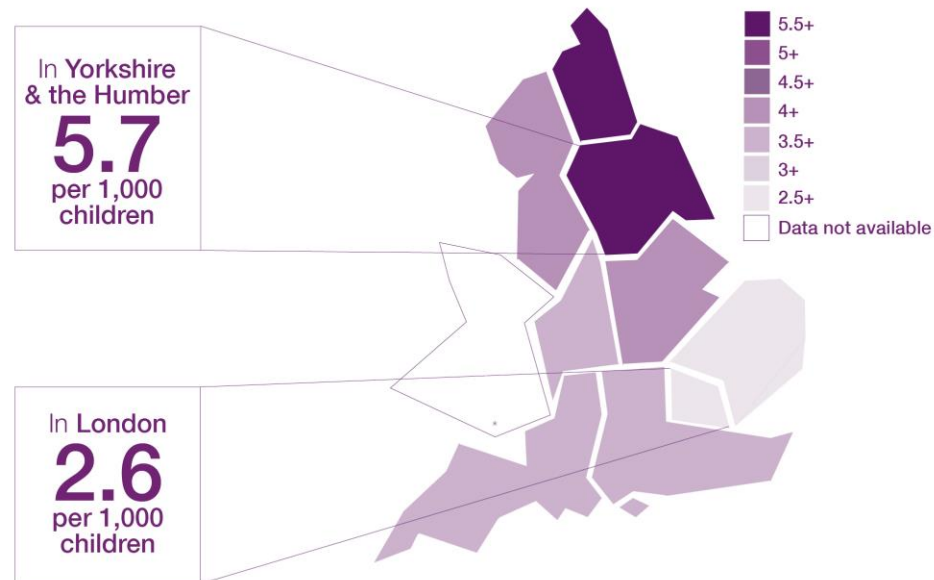
Child sexual abuse in 2020/21: Trends in official data
csacentre.org.uk

Child sexual abuse is prevalent across England and Wales but where children live impacts whether that abuse is identified.

Recorded child sexual abuse offences by region



Children at risk of child sexual abuse in local authority assessments



These maps show the **average rates** within each region; there are wide differences in rates across regions between individual police forces/local authorities.

More reporting of child sexual abuse but fewer prosecutions and convictions

Child sexual abuse in 2020/21: Trends in official data
csacentre.org.uk



Sources: Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes 2020/21; Ministry of Justice, Criminal justice system statistics 2020; FOI request.
Please note: numbers rounded to the nearest hundred.

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Challenges in practice

Our response has always been too reactive

A pendulum swinging between media panics



THE PAEDO IS LANDING

FREAKS OF NATURE

The faces of normal boys but they had hearts of unparalleled evil. Killing James gave them a buzz

50

MORE MONSTERS TOOK PART IN CHILD SEX RING

- DOZENS ARE STILL WALKING FREE
- EVIL GANG TOOK AWAY MY DIGNITY
- WE'RE SORRY FOR NOT ACTING SOONER, SAY COPS AND COUNCIL
- AND HOW THE FAR RIGHT ALMOST WRECKED THE TRIAL

SPECIAL REPORTS: PAGES 4,5,6 & 7

PERV HUNT .COM

Website names
wanted paedos

28 MONTHS

SICKO JAILED

MAN SENTENCED FOR SEXUAL ABUSE

FROM 10.00 PM
BY THE 10.00 PM

Assumptions that follow the stereotypes...

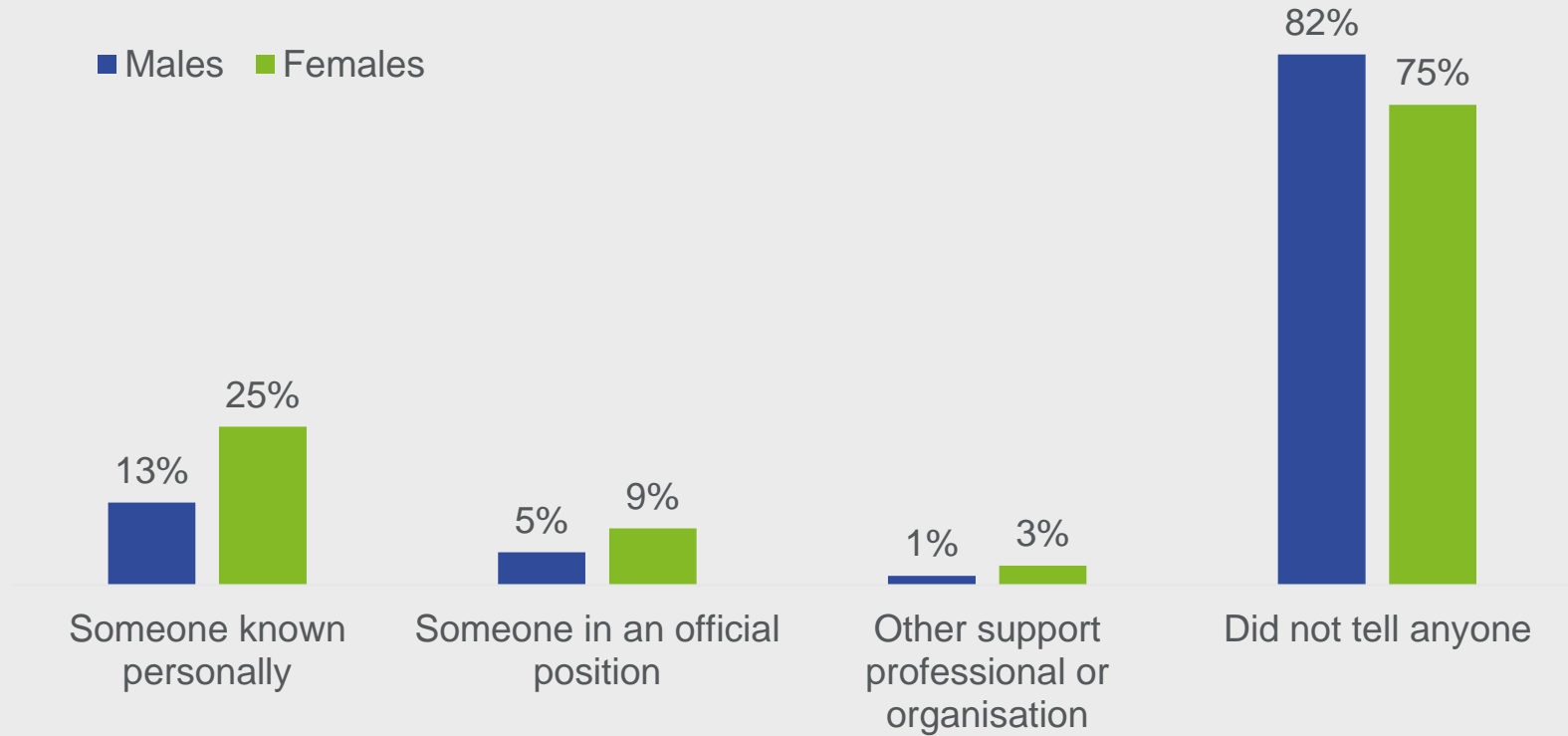
- That we can tell by looking
- That men who are ‘**good with children**’ do not sexually abuse them
- That if children say they **want to see** their abusive parent, they cannot be abusing them
- That if children don’t **appear distressed** when making a disclosure, then it must be untrue



“Professionals rely too heavily on children to verbally disclose”

(Report into Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment, JTAI 2020)

Who was told at the time



Far more children are being sexually abused than we are currently identifying and safeguarding

*“The current statutory child protection approach to responding to concerns that a child is being sexually abused puts **too much responsibility** on children and young people to recognise the abuse they are experiencing and then to seek a trusted adult to talk about what is happening to them”.*

*“This is a heavy, and frankly unrealistic responsibility. Children **cannot and should not be the only witnesses to the harm they experience**; it is **the responsibility of the adults** around the child to respond to help-seeking behaviour and to safeguard them”.*



“There were so many times when I thought about telling someone but it was just like, how do you bring it up? How do you just walk into a room and go to someone, ‘oh by the way this happened’?”

Making Noise (2017): IV29, Female 18 years

Why is it hard for children to tell?



Lacking language



Don't recognise it as abuse



Shame or embarrassment



Threat or manipulation



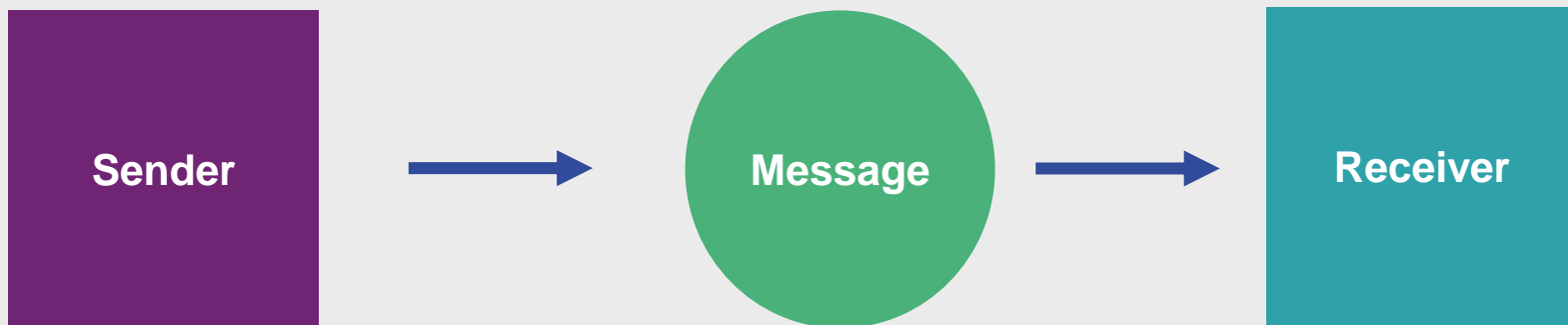
Fear of the consequences



Feeling responsible

Children need help to tell

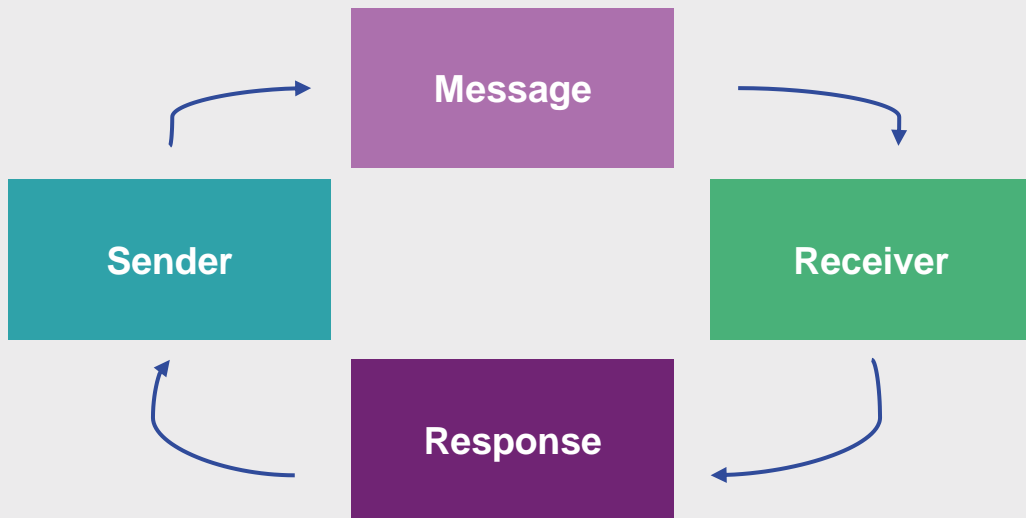
We think about disclosure as the act of a child telling someone (i.e. a one-way process)



This one directional view does not recognise the relational and social-interactive context of disclosures.

Our role in the process

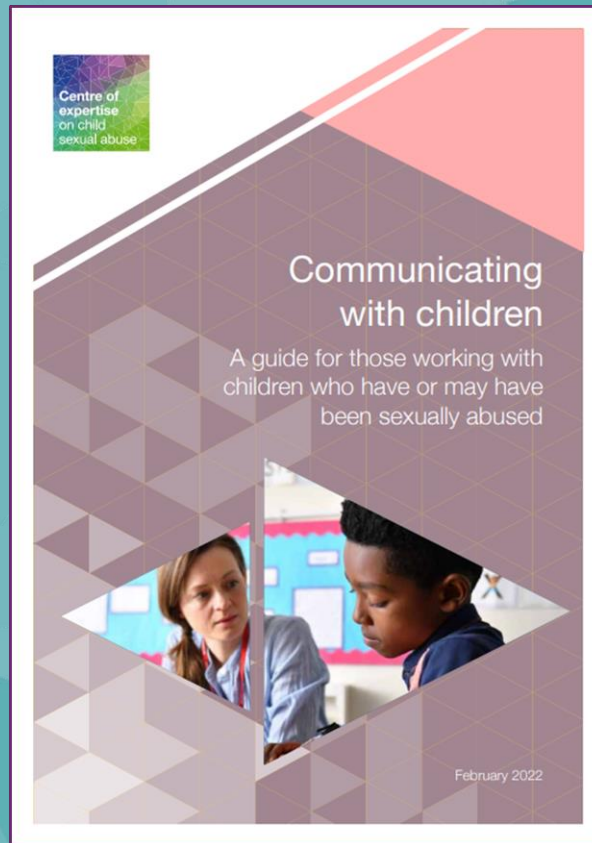
Instead, disclosure develops through an interplay between children's signs and expressions and the reactions of the adults around them



Children receive information on how adults respond to them, they process and evaluate this information, and they base their reactions on this

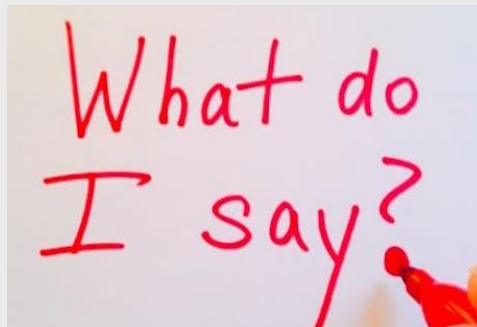
Communicating with children

A guide for those working with children who have or may have been sexually abused



The obstacle of fear

33

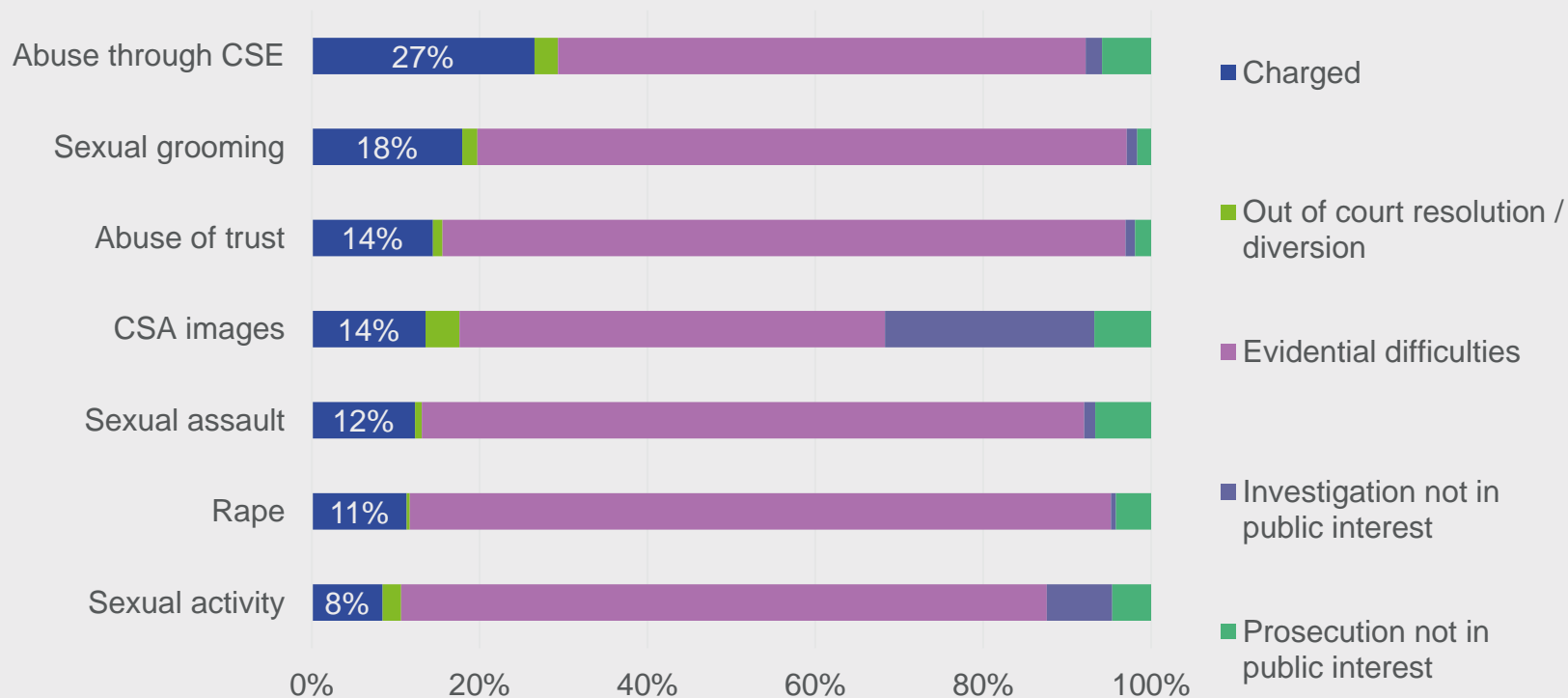


It can feel like a bit of a minefield

...Asking questions

...Contaminating evidence

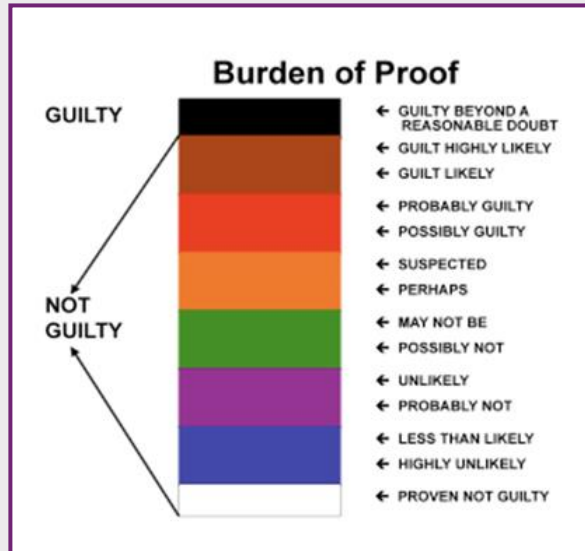
Police investigation outcomes by child sexual abuse offence type



The Burden of Proof

36

Beyond Reasonable Doubt



Balance of Probabilities



No further action (NFA)

No further action is when the **Police / Crown Prosecution Service** make a decision not to charge someone with an offence. This may be because there is not enough evidence or it is not in the public interest.

- It does **not** mean the child has not been believed or listened to
- It does **not** mean that agencies walk away because there is nothing that can be done
- It is **not** the time to decide what support can be given. That should already be happening.
- It does **not** mean that an investigation cannot be restarted should further evidence come to light.

The evidence:

Sexual abuse is rarely 'clear cut'

How can we 'absolutely know' abuse has taken place?

- Clear disclosure...repeated at least twice
- Medical evidence of sexual harm
- Admission of guilt from perpetrator
- Witnessed by someone else
- Images/computer records of the abuse exist

Rarely will we reach a position of 'absolute knowing'



Building a picture of concerns



Signs and indicators

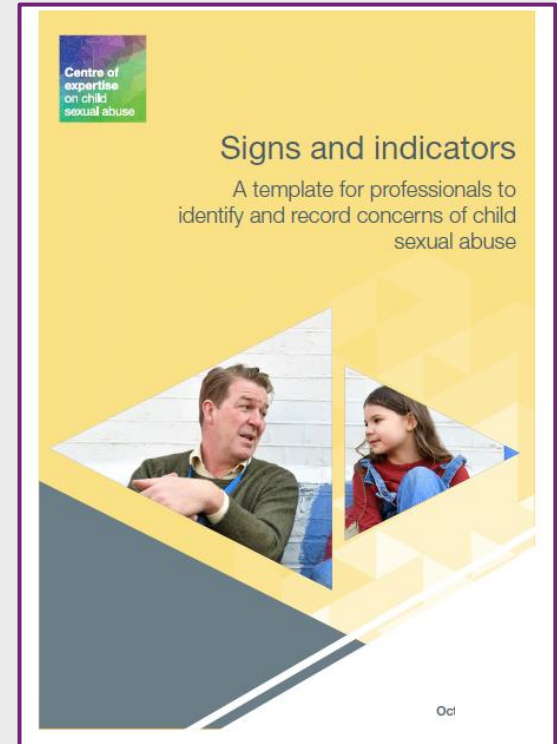
The aim of our resource

The template aims to create a **common language** among professionals to discuss, record and share concerns that a child is being, or has been sexually abused.

It aims to help you:

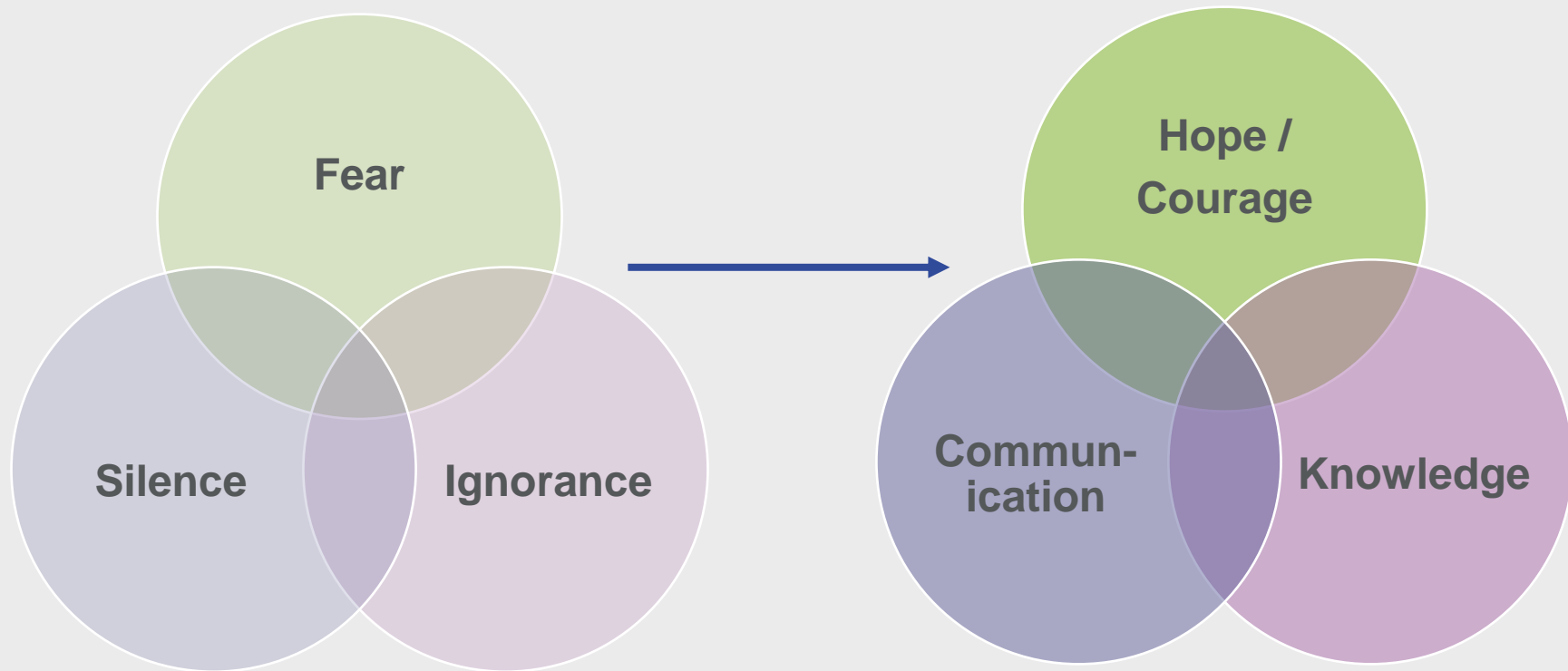
- Consider, identify and clearly record signs which indicate that sexual abuse is or has been taking place
- Discuss and explore concerns that a child is being or has been sexually abused, and communicate these concerns to other organisations and agencies

Do note, it is not a diagnostic tool, nor is it intended for use as a “risk assessment” or a “box-ticking exercise”



Understanding and responding well to signs
and indicators in a child is a **multi-agency
responsibility**

We need hope, communication and knowledge



Top tips

- ✓ Challenge our own and others' assumptions
- ✓ Remember our role in the disclosure process
- ✓ Think '*what if I'm right?*' not '*what if I'm wrong?*'
- ✓ Remember our legal burden of proof
- ✓ Ask '*what evidence **do I have?***'
- ✓ Be hopeful
- ✓ Be brave
- ✓ Seek knowledge
- ✓ Have confidence in our own skills
- ✓ **Talk about it!**

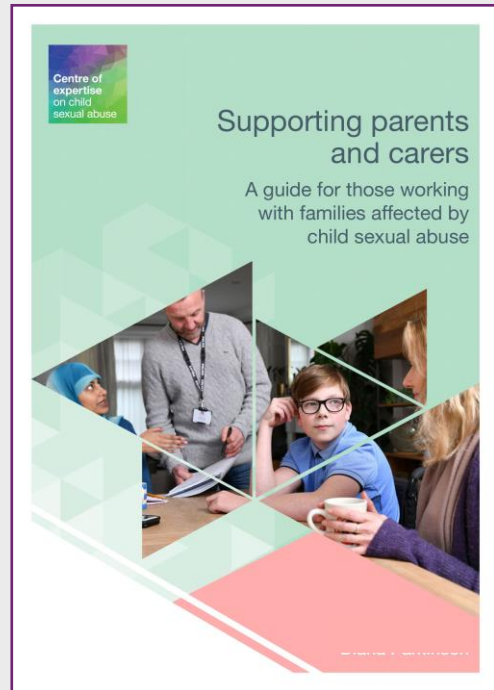
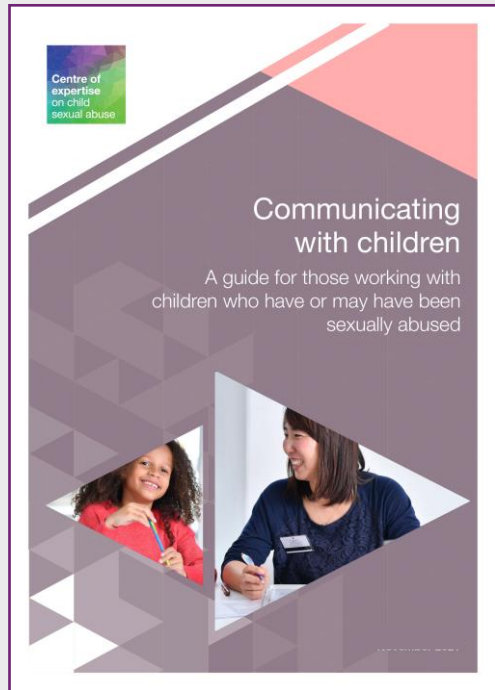
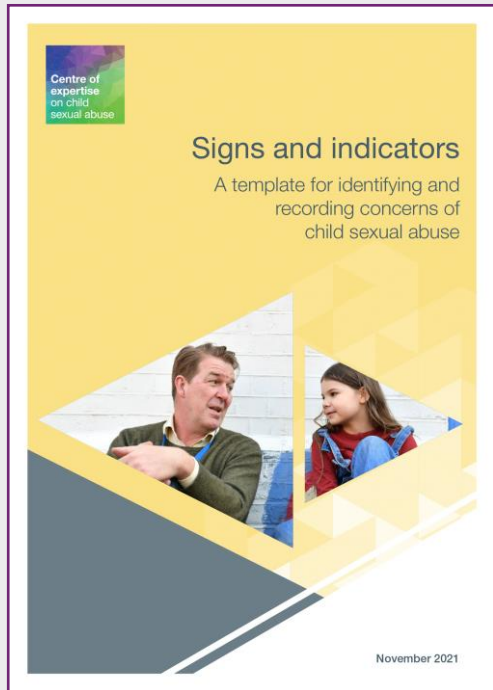


Together, we have collective strength

“Remember there are always far more people who want to protect children than those who want to abuse them. We should use – and be heartened by – the great potential in collective strength”.

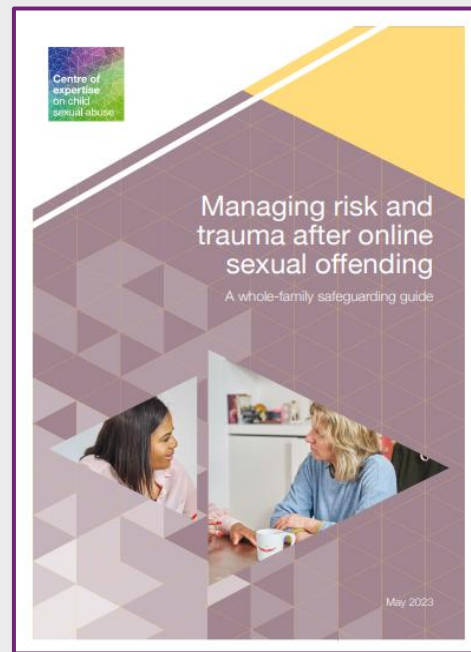
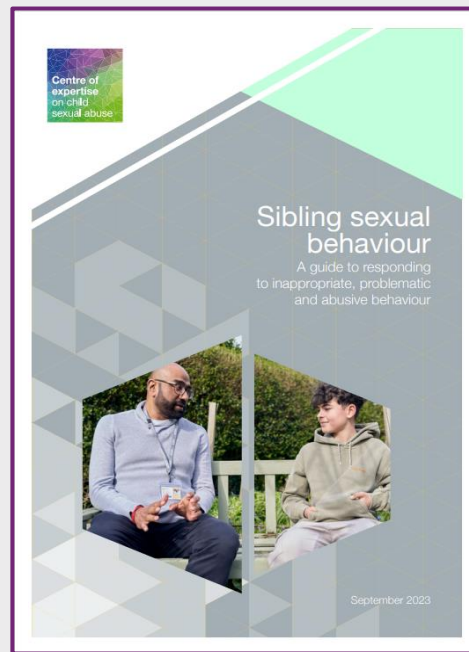
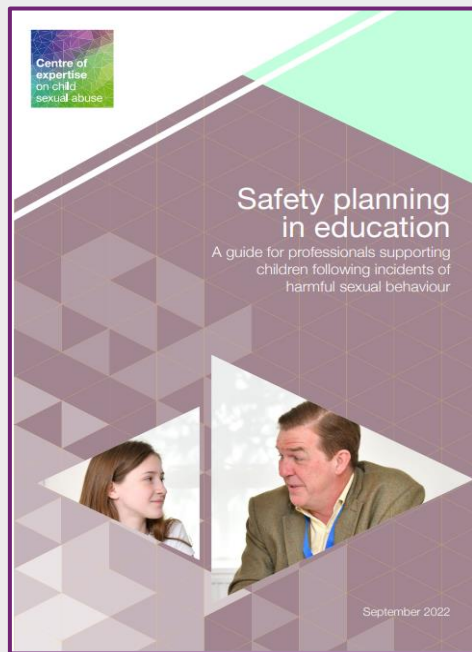
(Sarah Nelson, 2016)

Resources for practice



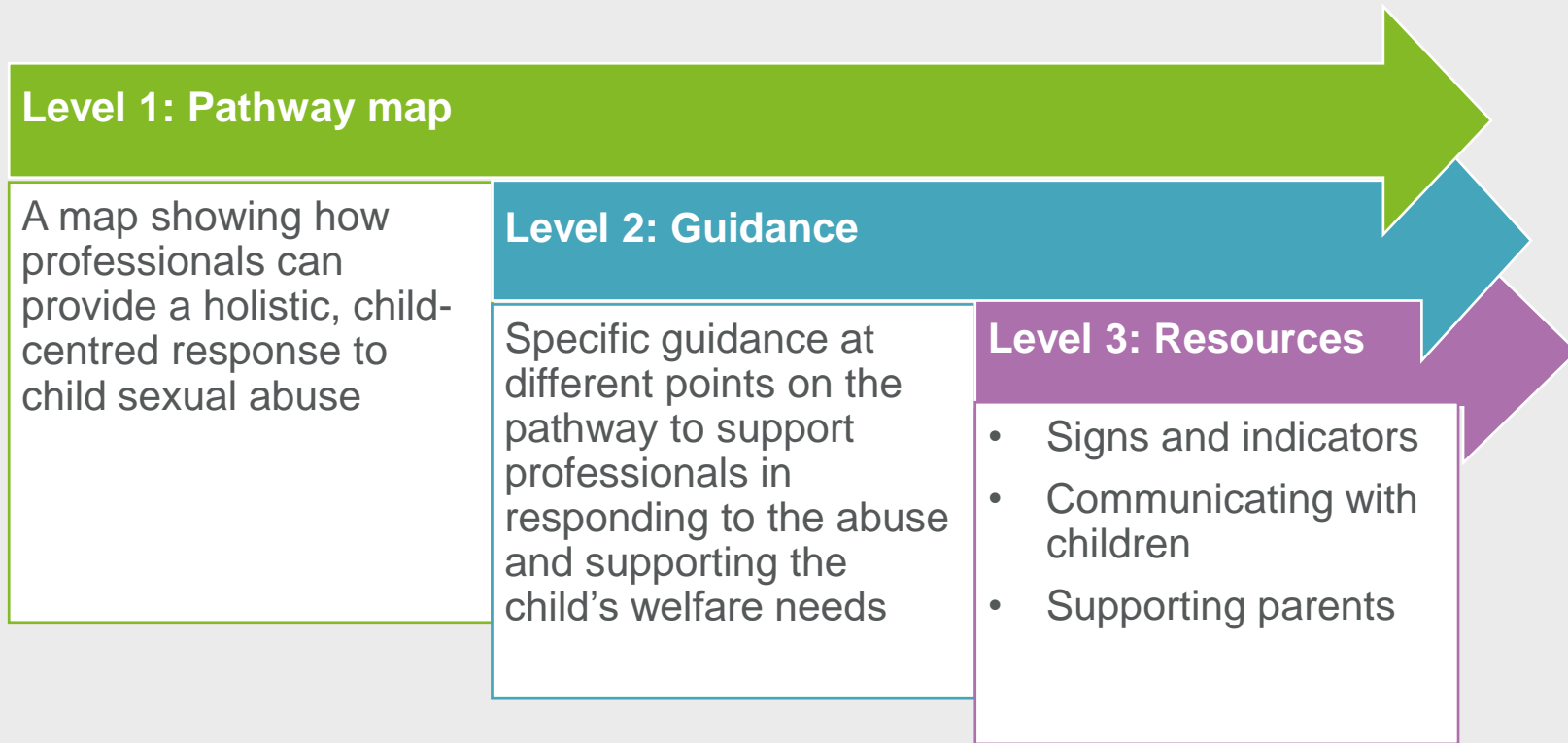
All resources are free to download on our site. With 12 short videos covering key themes:
<http://www.csacentre.org.uk/knowledge-in-practice/practice-improvement/>

More practice resources



Just launched!

The Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway



Key messages from research

What are they?

- Succinct, relevant information for frontline practitioners and commissioners
- The most up-to-date research to support confident provision of the best possible responses, in one accessible overview

Topics include:

- Impacts of child sexual abuse
- Child sexual abuse in institutional contexts
- Looked-after children and child sexual abuse
- Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour



<http://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/>

Sign up to our newsletter

- ✓ Latest research
- ✓ Practice guidance
- ✓ Comment
- ✓ News
- ✓ Ideas

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/subscribe-to-csa-centre-mailing-list/>



If you are affected by anything that has been discussed today...



The Survivors Trust

Find help, support and advice in your area: [Survivors Trust directory of services.](#)



Rape Crisis helpline [0808 802 9999](tel:0808 802 9999)

www.rapecrisis.org.uk



National Association for People Abused in Childhood [0808 801 0331](tel:0808 801 0331)

<https://napac.org.uk/>



SurvivorsUK

Online help for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape.

<https://www.survivorsuk.org/ways-we-can-help/online-helpline/>

Any questions?

51



Thank you

For more information please contact

Anna Glinski

Deputy Director

Anna.glinski@csacentre.org.uk



**Centre of expertise
on child sexual abuse**

Tanners Lane
Barkingside, Ilford
Essex IG6 1QG



@CSACentre

info@csacentre.org.uk

[csacentre.org.uk](https://www.csacentre.org.uk)

12 December 2023