



A resource for parents

# Finding out your child has been harmed through Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse

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As parents we want to keep our children safe and protected from harm. It is one of the primary drivers of being a parent – the balance between allowing our children to develop into independent adults, while protecting them from as much hurt as possible. But despite our best intentions, harm happens and sometimes we have to face the unimaginable truth that our child has been sexually abused. When this happens it is normal and natural to experience a range of emotions and responses that can be extremely difficult to process and manage. This leaflet is for parents in this situation. It is not about your child, it is not telling you what you should do to support them; it is about you and how to recognise and cope with the whirlwind of reactions that you are feeling.

## Finding Out

How you find out can make a difference to your reactions. Is this something your child is telling you? Have you stumbled across the information? Have you been informed by a third party – perhaps the school or the police?

**In the moment of finding out, the most prevalent feelings are shock and disbelief.**



Many people report that their first reaction was to do something mundane – like sorting out the washing or hoovering – after receiving the news. This can seem bizarre when something so significant has happened, and can make you question your priorities, but be reassured that this is a normal way of processing shock and allowing the brain to take things in.

Often in the initial stages of the investigation there may be limited evidence therefore not giving you the proof that could confirm what is being said is true. This is a horrible situation to be in and there may be additional pressure on you to make immediate decisions about keeping your child safe. Listen to the professionals' concerns, or what you child has just told you. It is incredibly rare for a child to make up that they have been sexually abused, and although mistakes by professionals do happen, this too is rare.

**At this stage try not to think too far ahead**, think about what needs to be done in the next few days. This will enable you to have some time to process what you have been told, to seek clarification and establish your own support network that may help with the bigger decisions you may be making later on.

**What we do know is that recovery starts at the point of discovery** – for the family as well as the victim. This is a devastating time, but it is in fact the beginning of the journey towards coming out the other side.

### Top Talking Tips

**For guidance on how to manage that initial conversation, see our leaflet 'Conversations with your child about online harm'.**

## Your emotions

**You are likely to be feeling a mix of emotions that contradict each other. These might include shock, disbelief, anger, shame, despair, hopelessness, embarrassment, sadness, horror, guilt, relief, outrage, disappointment, denial and blame.**

Many of these emotions will be directed at the perpetrator – the individual or individuals who have harmed your child. But some of them may also be directed at your child, yourself or your partner. Again, this is normal. It's important to accept these contradictory feelings and understand that they are a part of the process you will move through. It can feel completely devastating and as if nothing will ever be the same again.

One often-felt emotion is that of guilt and self-blame. It's common to feel as though this is your fault. That you should somehow have spotted it sooner or should have been aware enough to prevent it. It's hard to accept when something like this has happened and our brains will often track back and try to find ways to make it not true; ways that might have

stopped it happening. And this can sometimes turn to anger against yourself or your child that you or they should have known better.

In the end, it is most helpful to deal with what is, not what could have been or what you would like to have happened. Harm has happened. It was not your fault or your child's fault. Place the blame where it belongs – with the abuser.

It is possible that you may feel some anger towards your child, often accompanied by guilt about feeling this way. This combination of anger and guilt is also a normal and natural response to the situation. It can be helpful to express these emotions to someone else – a trusted friend or therapist. This will help you place the blame squarely where it belongs – with the abuser. As your emotions come and go, there will be times when they feel overwhelming and it's hard to manage anything else. Think of these emotions like waves on a stormy sea. Ride the waves, accept them as they come, and don't try to make any decisions or have difficult conversations while you are in their grip. The calmer water will come – emotions ebb and flow – and so wait for these before you make any decisions.



**Your child will also be feeling a range of emotions, often overlapping with the ones you are experiencing, but sometimes very different.** These may clash with yours, which can lead to heated and tearful conversations – and/or difficulty talking about it at all. Don't try to deny these emotions or feel bad about them. The best thing to do is acknowledge them – to yourself and to the rest of the family, while making it clear to your child that you don't blame them.

### Useful statements:

"I feel so angry about this and I know this is not your fault at all, but I'm so angry that it happened and this is overwhelming me right now."

"I'm struggling to take this in and I can't help wishing that it could have been stopped from happening, but I don't blame you at all."



## How to talk about it

There is no right way to talk to your child about what's happened, but there are some things that can help. You might both want to talk about it, but neither of you know how to start, and it may be difficult to know what words to use. Or maybe one of you wants to

talk about it but the other doesn't. You might even find that this changes over time, so that the person who didn't want to talk initially becomes ready to talk and the other person no longer wants to.

**This is ok, we all process things differently. Be supportive, check in with your child and wait for the right time.**

**It can feel like an invasion of privacy to talk about the details of the abuse but finding the right language will help. The best way to do this is to normalise it as much as possible and check in with your child.**

No matter how much you want to know exactly what happened, it is important to let your child tell you in their own way – as much or as little as they wish to tell you. Be careful not to interrogate your child or make them feel uncomfortable. It may be that you, or your child, wants to talk but the other isn't ready yet and needs some more time. It is essential that you don't ask them leading questions but let them talk about things in their own words, allowing you just to clarify what they mean. It can be difficult and embarrassing for your child to find the right words to use, so give them time. Simple outline drawings of a person can help them point to body parts rather than having to say the words out loud. These conversations are difficult for both of you, so try to stay as calm as possible.

**When you are talking about it, do remember to check in with your child's feelings and emotions, as well as what actually happened.**

And while some of your own emotions may include frustration about what they did or didn't do, remember the strengths they have shown too. Sexual abuse is the fault of the perpetrator – abusers are manipulative and persuasive, and the blame lies fully with them. The resilience and courage that your child has shown should be noticed and praised. Equally, this may be the first time your child has seen you this upset, perhaps the first time they have seen you cry. It's important to reassure them that they are not the one making you sad.

### Remember

*Talking about other things is also important. Remember your normal life, even if it feels like a different world at the moment. Take time to still talk about the events of your day, your plans for the weekend, what you would like to eat for dinner, what's happening on EastEnders, as this will help re-establish normality and help with recovery.*

### Top Talking Tips

For more ideas on how to manage your conversation with your child, see our leaflet 'Conversations with your child about online harm'.

## Telling people and reporting

The discovery of the abuse often means more people need to know what's happened and this can leave you feeling conflicted about telling people or keeping things secret. This is further complicated if your partner has a different view on who to tell and how to proceed – even down to which of you should talk to your child about it.

It is normal to feel uncertain about who to trust. You may want or need to tell the wider family, your child's school, professionals from the police or social services. You may want to avoid the reactions of sympathetic neighbours or colleagues. There may be an impending court case. These can all bring feelings of shame and embarrassment and a perceived stigma that you are now a "family that's been abused". This in turn can bring feelings of guilt about this embarrassment.

Again, there isn't necessarily one right way to respond, and **the best thing is to work through it as a family and try to decide together the best approach for each situation.** No decision will feel perfect because this is not somewhere you ever wanted to be. But remember, you can only do your best and can only make the best decision for right now. If things change, you can change what you decide to do.

**While talking to people about this is difficult, it is important that abuse is not kept secret and to recognise that some action will be required for your child's and your recovery,** whether or not there is a wider case for the police or courts. Seek advice from organisations such as the Marie Collins Foundation, NSPCC or Childline about what to do next if you are not already in touch with a professional third party.

## Context

When sexual abuse has happened, the specific context will affect your reaction. For example, if you have been abused yourself this will trigger a response relating to your own experiences. If the abuse was perpetrated by someone you knew – maybe someone you trusted, such as a friend or family member – you may initially feel a split in your loyalties, and it may take time to accept the full weight of what they did. Levels of acceptance come slowly – one step at a time – so go with the flow and let the story come out at its own pace.





## What can you do?

**As part of the support that you and your child will be getting, people will be telling you to look after yourself.**

What does that mean? Looking after yourself looks different for different people, but a key component is to try to accept whatever

emotions you feel, however contradictory, and to maintain hope and belief that recovery and normal life are possible. Continue to do the things that nourish and enrich you – it's ok for you to still enjoy yourself or forget about it for a while, even if this feels difficult or impossible. Meeting your own needs will help you manage the situation and your own emotions more effectively.

### Top tips to help calm emotions

When we are in the grip of strong emotions it is very hard to think clearly, so it is useful to have tools to help you calm those emotions. Here are some of our top tips to try:

#### Distractions

such as **exercise**, **housework** and **work**.

#### Talking

to people.

#### Relaxation Techniques

such as **meditation** and **listening to music**.

**Breathing Techniques** are simple and effective. It may seem trivial to think that just changing our breathing can help – after all it won't change what's happened. But breathing creates physical changes that can help us feel calmer and more in control. Specific breathing techniques disengage you from your fight/flight response – the stormy wave of emotion – and help you feel clear-headed again.

**Square Breathing** – breathing in for four, hold for four, out for four and hold for four.

**Extended Exhale Breathing** – where you make your outbreath longer than the inbreath, perhaps by counting to five as you breathe in and eight as you breathe out. Try to breathe from deep in your belly rather than taking shallow breaths from the upper chest. There are more breathing techniques online that can help lower intensity of emotion and bring back perspective and clear thinking.

**It can also be helpful to think about what has happened as a bereavement, a loss.** Something has happened that can't be undone, but this doesn't mean that there is no hope for the future. We know that the stages of grief move between disbelief, anger, sadness and acceptance. These can happen in any order, and you move between them freely – there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

**Growing Around Grief** – when grief stays with you, but as time and your recovery proceed, you grow around it, making it relatively smaller as the rest of your life grows. Remembering everything else about your child, your family and all the richness and strengths that you bring each other will help strengthen this perspective. Seeing what has happened as a bereavement can make it easier to accept the accompanying feelings of loss and grief and find ways to move forwards.

## The future

This leaflet is not about how to support your child, but to help you understand your own emotions at this time.

As you look towards the future, it is difficult not to let this event colour things. You are likely to feel more vulnerable and more protective of your child, intensifying the natural instinct to keep your child safe from harm. But the rules of parenthood remain the same. Your child still needs your help to grow into an independent adult and they still need to experience the normal adolescent rights of passage.

Try to avoid a knee jerk reaction to enforce stricter rules about going out, using technology or your child's boundaries. Banning tech or stopping your child going out will be counterproductive in the long run. Keep conversations open so that they know you want to keep them safe, while still giving them the opportunities to make their own mistakes. It may be difficult to think of your child engaging in sexual activity as they get older – but they will, and you will want this to be a respectful and positive experience. Focus on talking about and modelling what makes a healthy relationship rather than trying to control who they see and what they do.

As you continue recovery, you will move away from the sense of being a victim. You, your child and your family will learn to be yourselves again, not defined by this event. Recovery will happen, and in the meantime be kind to yourself as you negotiate what has happened.





This leaflet has been brought to you by The Marie Collins Foundation and Zoë Metcalfe, the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire and the City of York.

For further information on conversations with your child about online harm please visit contact us using the details below:



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