A resource for parents

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

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 your 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.
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.

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

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
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Telling people and reporting

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.

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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,

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.

Growing Around Grief

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
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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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