

PARENTS & CARERS INFORMATION BOOKLET

Family Action Leicester PSA service



Many thanks to the Leicester PSA team in producing this booklet.

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Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families by delivering innovative and effective services and support. We seek to empower people and communities to address their issues and challenges through practical, financial and emotional help.

The Post Sexual Abuse (PSA) service started in April 1996. The service receives funding from the NHS and other services, offering support to children and their parents and carers when a child or young person has experienced sexual abuse.

About this booklet

The PSA service has put this booklet together to provide information, advice and support to parents and carers after their child has made a disclosure of sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse can affect boys and girls regardless of their age, race, culture, ability or personal circumstances.

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse estimates that 500,000 children are sexually abused each year (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 2021 census results).

Research tells us that a child's ability to cope with the effects of sexual abuse is greatly improved when they are well supported by their most immediate family and friends.

At the same time, we recognise that a disclosure of child sexual abuse can have a very significant effect upon parents and carers and that the core people in the child's life also have a need for support, information and advice.

Our hope is that this booklet will reduce some of the confusion and fear that parents and carers may feel and help them to feel more able to support their children through a difficult and challenging time.

What is child sexual abuse (CSA)?

“The involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of a society.”

(1999 WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention)

Definitions of abuse can differ greatly, based upon the exact nature of the abuse or the age differences between those involved. In its broadest sense, sexual abuse can be defined as:

“...contact or non-contact, and can happen online or offline. This can involve children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual online images, watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways” (Working Together: HM Government, 2006).

It might be a single incident or it may have gone on for a long time. It can happen to boys and girls of any age. In most cases the child is abused by someone they know, and the abuser will usually have an element of power or control in the relationship.

If a child feels that either an adult or child is behaving in an inappropriate way, we need to make sure that they have the permission (and freedom) to define that as unacceptable. It is very important for people to define their own experiences and avoid being labelled and categorised by others. It is very easy for us to minimise abuse because we might find it difficult to deal with ourselves.

Child abuse is both serious and unacceptable, no matter what form it takes.

Ethnicity and Diversity

We know that, unfortunately, child sexual abuse happens in every part of society, every culture and religion from the rich to the poor. Family Action's PSA service aims to work in a culturally sensitive manner, recognising that there may be barriers to disclosing and accessing services for children and young people relating to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, we ensure that when working with all children we acknowledge the child's culture, identity and background.

Children with disabilities/SEND and their families

It is widely recognised that children with disabilities, SEND, or Looked-After Child status are significantly more vulnerable to experiencing all types of abuse (Miller and Brown: 2014 NSPCC Report, We have the right to be safe: protecting disabled children from abuse).

It is important to understand the different risks and responses for children with these protected characteristics, in order to protect them from further abuse. The PSA service tailors support when working with children who have additional needs.

Grooming

Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust, and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them. Children and young people who are groomed can be sexually abused, exploited or trafficked. Anybody can be a groomer, no matter their age, gender or race (NSPCC).

It may have involved some planning and some means of keeping the child quiet about what was happening. This may be by tricking the child, perhaps into thinking it is 'normal' or that they are somehow responsible for what is happening, or by treats, attention or bribery. This is the process commonly referred to as 'grooming'.


Technology and sexual abuse

Children and young people often look to online communities to form relationships or friendships.

The internet and social media can be used by abusers to facilitate sexual abuse in different ways. Children may be coerced or blackmailed into sending or receiving sexual images. They may also be victims of online grooming, whereby an abuser develops a relationship with a child online in order to gain their trust and enable abuse to take place. This may involve the abuser posing as a potential boyfriend/girlfriend whilst hiding their true identity. This kind of grooming can lead to abuse taking place offline – for example, by coercing the child to meet up face-to-face.

When young people communicate via the internet, they can become less cautious and talk about things far more openly than they might when communicating in person. This can mean that they trust someone online more quickly and easily than someone they have just met face to face.

Although online sexual abuse is usually associated with strangers targeting children they don't know, it can also be perpetrated by friends or family members.



Children can be tricked or pressured into exchanging sexual images or engaging in sexual conversation, even by someone they are close to.

If you need information on how to keep your child safe online, www.ceop.police.uk has a range of resources and a form to report concerns about online abuse.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE)

CSE is the sexual exploitation of children and young people , where the child receives 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, affection, gifts, money) as a result of involvement in a sexual activity.

CSE can take place through the use of technology without the child recognising that this is happening.

Those exploiting a child have power over them in some way, whether this is due to their age, intellect, physical strength or financial or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common in these exploitative relationships and they make it difficult for the child to make choices due to their social, economic and/or emotional vulnerability (NSPCC website).

CSE can take place through the use of technology without the child recognising that this is happening.

What is disclosure?

Disclosure is when a child or young person shares new information with another person that he or she has been sexually abused. Disclosure can be a difficult and scary process for children. Some children may take weeks, months or even years to tell the full story of what has happened to them. Some will never tell the whole story. Many children never tell anyone about the abuse.

Recent statistics suggest that only 1 in 8 victims of sexual abuse come to the attention of statutory agencies (Children's Commissioner: Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment: 2015).

Barriers to disclosure

It can be very difficult for children and young people to disclose that they are being sexually abused. Evidence gathered by a recent report highlights the following barriers to telling:

- self-blame and guilt
- fear of the abuser
- fear of the consequences and being judged
- loyalty to other family members
- lack of opportunities to tell someone
- distrust of professionals.
- fear of family breakdown
- fear of bringing shame onto the family
- financial dependence on the abuser
- fear of being the subject of gossip or bullying at school or in the community

(Children's Commissioner: Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in the Family Environment: 2015)

What happens when a child discloses sexual abuse?

If a child under 18 discloses to any professional (e.g. a teacher, a therapist, a medical professional) that they have been sexually abused, there is a legal duty for the police and children's social care to be informed.

If your child has been sexually abused then a crime has been committed, and it is the job of the police to investigate. It is the legal duty of Children's Services to make sure that children are safe and protected from harm.

The social worker or police officer investigating your child's disclosure of sexual abuse may seek your permission for your child to be medically examined.

A CH-ISVA (Children's Independent Sexual Violence Advisor) is available to children up to the age of 18 who have disclosed any type of sexual abuse, whether this happened recently or in the past. The police can make a referral to their service, or you can self-refer.

Once the police have finished their investigation, they will advise you as to whether there is enough information to send to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The CPS will then decide if the case has enough evidence to go to court.

If you need more information about these processes, we are happy to talk about this with you.

Sometimes there is not enough evidence to go to court or to prove that the abuser is guilty, but this does not mean that your child is not believed or that the abuse didn't happen.

Regardless of the outcome, your child will still need lots of support once all police investigations are closed.

Important messages to help you on your journey

If no other child or adult can give any information about your child's disclosure of sexual abuse it does not mean it has not happened – very often abusers sexually abuse children making sure that no one else can know about the abuse.

If there is no medical evidence of your child's account of having been sexually abused it does not mean that it has not happened. Very often the way in which a child is sexually abused means that there is no medical/ physical evidence of what has happened.

If the person your child has allegedly been sexually abused but is not charged by the police, this in no way means that your child is not believed. Sometimes the police cannot obtain enough clear information and evidence to charge a person.

If the case does not go to court, it means that a successful conviction is unlikely, often due to lack of evidence. It is important to remember that in law there is a difference between what can be considered to be information and actual evidence.

No carer is prepared for his or her child to be sexually abused, and no one is born an expert at dealing with all the consequences of abuse. Be kind to yourself as well as to your child.

The person who abused your child may have undermined your child's trust in you to believe and protect them. Rebuilding this trust will take time, patience and understanding but it can happen.

Rebuilding [this] trust will take time, patience and understanding but it can happen.

Listening to your child, taking it seriously and offering support is vital.

It may be frightening or difficult for a child when they start to disclose. Your child may only be able to disclose a little bit at a time, their story may change, or they may take back what they have already said. They may even deny that any abuse has taken place. This is not unusual as children are faced with many reactions to their disclosures, although it can be confusing and frustrating for their carers.

Delayed disclosures are common and do not mean that you have not been a good carer.

The person/people who sexually abused your child may have used lots of strategies to prevent you from protecting or believing that your child is being/has been abused. They likely will have thought carefully about how to get close to your child, how they would keep them from telling and how to prevent you from finding out or believing them if they tell.

Children rarely lie about being sexually abused.

It is important to remember that any kind of sexual abuse to a child is serious and will have some effect. Listening to your child, taking it seriously and offering support is vital.

Sexual abuse has the capacity to affect every aspect of a human being's life, turning it completely upside down.

It can have a range of physical and emotional effects.

How might your child be impacted?



We have listed below some of the most common physical and emotional impacts:

- Nightmares and/or sleep disturbances
- Development of disgust or self hatred for their physical selves
- Under- or over-eating
- Difficulties with personal hygiene – either neglecting or overdoing it
- Guilt/self blame
- Denial of the impact of the abuse (e.g. it is not that serious)
- Low self esteem
- Being unable to talk about or identify feelings, experiencing ‘numbness’
- Substance addictions (e.g. drugs, solvents, alcohol)
- Self harm/suicidal thoughts
- Difficulties/confusion with sexual identity
- Anxiety, fear, depression, guilt, anger, rage, and shame
- Expressing anger in a variety of ways
- Flashbacks – re-experiencing the trauma
- Panic attacks
- Problems with concentration
- Showing age inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Relationship difficulties
- Bedwetting/soiling

Recanting or taking back a disclosure is common & does not mean that a child was lying about the abuse. Children may feel under pressure to recant because of the impact their disclosure has had on their family.

How does this impact upon you?

Parents and carers talk about a whole range of feelings and emotions experienced when they discover that their child has been sexually abused.

There are no right or wrong feelings and the way in which you react as an individual can be affected by lots of things: your values, beliefs, culture, what support you have, and whether you have experienced abuse in your own life.

Shock/numbness Feeling unable to really show any kind of response and just feeling in crisis. This feeling can last a few hours or longer; parents and carers talk about feeling very separate from their life and people around them during this time, and find it difficult to know what to do, think or feel.

Confusion/fear While an investigation is ongoing, parents and carers can feel very confused and fearful about what is happening and what might happen next. Some speak of feeling “so confused” about everything, that it is difficult to really understand the roles of various people like social workers and police officers.

Disbelief/blocking Parents and carers commonly talk about finding their child’s account difficult to believe and find themselves constantly asking whether what is being said is true. This can be even more difficult if the abuser is someone close to you.

It is important to give yourself time but remember your child will need to know that they are being listened to and taken seriously.

Often as the information comes together, feelings of disbelief can disappear. Believing children may be especially difficult if the offender is a partner, relative, someone close, or another child.

If your child is a teenager you may find yourself wondering if they were partially responsible for the abuse – if they could have resisted, or why they didn't tell sooner. It is important to remember that power takes many forms and that your teenager may have felt coerced in ways that were not physical.

Very often there will be no absolute proof about what your child is saying.

Pretending it has not happened or not letting yourself listen is a common way of protecting yourself and trying to cope.

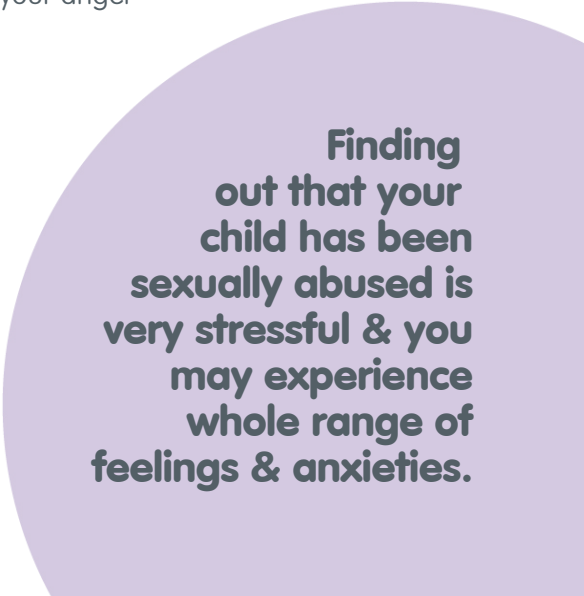
Anger Parents and carers can feel very angry. It can be often directed at the offending person, but also sometimes towards the people investigating or towards the person reporting it and towards the child or themselves.

Parents and carers can at times feel overwhelmed with anger especially if the child's disclosure has brought about significant changes or losses in their lives.

Parents can feel angry at the challenging behaviour that is sometimes displayed by children who have been abused.

It is important that your child is not made to feel responsible for your anger or for what has happened.

It is easy for your child to misinterpret your anger as being because of them. Try and give them the message that you are angry with the abuser and not with them.



Finding out that your child has been sexually abused is very stressful & you may experience whole range of feelings & anxieties.

Embarrassment/feeling judged Parents and carers can worry that everyone will get to know about what has happened to their child and that they will become blamed in some way or isolated. They can feel judged by those in their community.

They can feel that sexual abuse is not possible in their family or community and if it is possible, then this makes them feel 'unusual' or 'different'. It is important to remember that there are many children who have been sexually abused, all from different backgrounds, communities and cultures.

Guilt/feelings of failure Many parents and carers start to blame themselves for their child's experience of abuse and find themselves frantically looking back over the past trying to remember signs of their child being abused that they have missed.

Parents and carers can feel that they have failed their child and failed to protect them. Parents and carers can also feel very let down by the fact that their child may have told someone else about their experiences of abuse.

Children who have very good and close relationships with their carers can find it too difficult to tell them about experiences of sexual abuse because often they feel guilty and responsible for what has happened and fear rejection.

It is important to place the responsibility for your child's abusive experiences firmly with the offender. It will help your child avoid blaming themselves for the abuse if they can see you doing this.

Betrayed/let down Parents and carers of sexually abused children can feel very betrayed and let down by the alleged abuser. If the offending person was a partner, parents and carers can start to blame themselves and may even feel jealous that their partner has shared time, affection, and sexual intimacy with the child, particularly if that child is a teenager. They can feel that their child has betrayed them as they have been unaware of this 'secret' behaviour and relationship.

It is important to remember that as a carer your personality, sexual attractiveness and relationship has not been a factor in your partner's offending.

The offending behaviour is about a person being sexually attracted to a child and then building on these feelings to plan and then abuse a child sexually regardless of their relationship with their partner. Without doubt, it is about control and an abuse of power.

People who sexually abuse children often make the child feel involved and responsible for the abuse. The child has not deliberately chose to betray their carer when they do not disclose what is happening. Remember, neither you nor your child are responsible for the abuse.

Conflict of loyalties If your child has been sexually abused by another family member this can be particularly difficult to understand and manage. It is not uncommon in these situations to want to deny or minimise what has happened, or to feel as though you need to maintain contact with the other relative.

However it is important to be honest about what has happened in order to ensure that your child is supported appropriately. It is important for your child to feel protected and prioritised.

Disgust Parents and carers may feel sheer disgust about what has happened to their child. This is a common reaction where parents and carers can't stop going over what has happened in their mind. It is normal to feel this way about the abuse to your child.

Grief and loss Parents and carers can feel grief and loss about their hopes and expectations for their child's life experiences, and about their own perception of the world as a safe place and others as trustworthy.

Depression Parents and carers of sexually abused children can experience depression, especially if they bury their feelings about what has happened to their child and do not receive support.

If parents and carers have themselves experienced sexual abuse they may feel especially depressed, feeling like history is repeating itself or that their family cannot escape abuse. The abuse of their child may raise issues about their own abuse that were never really addressed – so it is important that carers seek help for themselves.

Feeling depressed can obviously affect sleep, appetite, daily routines, health, relationships and jobs. Finding support in such circumstances is essential.

Ways you can support your child:

Giving the right messages from the start

At a time when you may be experiencing a lot of strong emotions, it can be very difficult to talk to your child, but it is essential that you give your child the right kind of messages from the start.

Be clear that your child is not to blame

Children need to know they are not to blame for what happened. Be clear that it is the person who has abused them who is responsible. Avoid asking questions such as, "why did you not tell anyone?" or "why did you still visit him/her?". These can give the impression that you think they are somehow responsible for what has happened.

Stay calm

Hearing that your child has been abused can bring up lots of powerful emotions, but your child will be looking to you to remain calm and in control. If your child sees your distress and anger, it may make them feel that it is their fault that you are upset and it may make it difficult for them to tell you about what has been happening to them.

The calmer and more matter-of-fact you are, the more likely that your child will be able to give full information both about what has happened and also about their feelings. Obviously, it can be difficult to be strong when you yourself may be feeling very distressed, but your child needs to know that you believe and support them and that it was really brave of them to talk about their experiences of abuse.

Talk to other family members

Other children in the family will also be affected by what has happened and will also need information.

It may not be either necessary or appropriate for brothers or sisters to be given the full details of their sibling's experience of abuse. However, to reduce their confusion and to encourage support for your abused child, it is important that siblings are given a clear, if general, explanation about what has happened, particularly if the disclosure has led to the family splitting up.

It is vital for brothers and sisters to understand that their abused brother/sister was not to blame for what has happened.

Give your child time and choice

It is really important as a carer to try and allow your child choice about how much they want to talk. Your child needs to know that you are there for them to talk to, but it is important that you do not insist that they tell you everything or talk about it when they do not want to. Your child also needs to know from you that they can express all of their feelings towards the person who abused them – good or bad. If the child had a close relationship with the person who abused them, they may need to talk about positive things about the abuser too.

Go with your child's pace as best as you can; talking about their experiences will help. Children do need to know that you will give them time, attention, and support to deal with their feelings.

Remember that it may take some time for your child to feel safe enough to express themselves. Try not to place too much emphasis on your child too soon to "put everything behind them and start afresh". Your child may feel that their feelings are being denied or that people cannot cope with their distress.

Be clear and honest

Sexual abuse can heavily involve keeping secrets; it is important to put an end to secrets to enable children to start to feel safe again.

Children who are not given information can sometimes think up their own reasons for why something has happened or not happened which may then leave them with false ideas about their situation.

For example, when an abuser ends up not having to go to court, it is important that the child knows that they have done all they can in giving information, and it is the lack of other information that has meant that the person who abused them will not be going to court. Without this information, a child may think that the case is not going to court because they (the child) have not been believed.

Help your child talk to others

You may have to explain to your child that not everyone will understand or support them. Your child should not be made to feel that they have to keep the experience of abuse a secret, but neither would it be advisable for them to trust everyone with information about their experiences. Sometimes, children can be helped to simply explain they were absent from school because they had to pass on some important and helpful information to the police if others become aware of a police investigation. It may help to work out with your child what they should tell others and identify specific people (i.e. a close friend, school teacher) whom they would trust.

In every other respect, following on from disclosure your child's life needs to be as normal as possible. Your child needs to believe that above all else they are a child and not just a "victim of sexual abuse". Normal routines and daily events will help your child feel secure.

Do not question your child

If there is a police investigation, the police will need to talk to your child. If your child needs to go to court, it will be important for the police to be able to show that your child was not questioned in a way that led them to saying they had been abused, so you should not question your child, but rather just ensure that they have the opportunity to talk freely.

Your child will need to know that you can and will listen to them.

Reassuring them that what has happened is not their fault is possibly the most important thing you can do.

Helpful messages

Some messages to give your children:

You are not to blame for what happened.

I am cross with the abuser and not with you.

I am sorry that this has happened to you.

We will get through this.

It is normal to be experiencing lots of different emotions and feelings.

There are good things in your life and good things that have happened to you.

You can recover from this experience.

Managing challenging behaviour

Some examples of challenging behaviours displayed by sexually abused children include:

- Physical assaults on themselves and others
- Anger and/or “lashing out”
- The need to control situations or decision-making
- Sexualised behaviours

These behaviours are often normal amongst all children, and are a normal part of parenting. However, they are particularly important forms of communication for children who have experienced sexual abuse. Many behaviours are a way to seek out secure attachment and a sense of safety and comfort. Parenting a traumatised child can involve therapeutic approaches.

Give your child opportunities to talk about their feelings, but don't force it. They will speak when they are ready. Be clear and consistent with discipline and how you respond to situations.

Children who have been sexually abused need to feel understood and supported but they also need to know when and how their behaviour is disappointing or causing problems. **Consistent discipline** helps a child feel secure: Unlike their experience of abuse, they understand the boundaries around certain behaviours and the expectations upon them as a child.

Give some clear understanding, choice and control to your child. Children who have been sexually abused can feel these have been taken away from them. They need encouragement and opportunity to choose to improve/change behaviour and self-awareness. They need to be included in decision making as much as is appropriately possible.

Appreciate and acknowledge good behaviour. Children who have been sexually abused can often feel worthless and lacking in confidence and they need reminding they are appreciated and loved. If children only get attention when their behaviour gets them in trouble, they will continue getting in trouble - even a telling off means they get some attention.

It is a good idea to educate your child about keeping safe. For them to understand their right to privacy, to know when touch is bad and inappropriate and how to seek help in future situations if they feel unsafe. However, it is important that first of all your child believes that the abuse was not their fault, otherwise this kind of information could give the impression that they knew how to protect themselves but did not.

Try to continue to show your normal level of affection with your child. Your child might withdraw from hugs and kisses and they need to be allowed to do this. With continued healthy affection, they will hopefully be able to feel confident again about sharing affection with you. It is important that you don't withdraw affection from your child or they may feel responsible in some way for the abuse or "different" because of the abuse.

Try to maintain normal routines in your child's life as this will help them to feel safe and secure. Give your child time to understand themselves and come to terms with their experience. This can take a long time and you will need to be patient. Sometimes things can improve and then your child can experience a setback when faced with a new situation or worry.

If a child has been sexually abused it does not mean that they will go on to abuse others. However, sometimes children who have been sexually abused can react by behaving sexually inappropriately towards other children. It is important to be clear with your child about appropriate body boundaries and to seek support from Children's Services if their behaviour is concerning – if it is not age appropriate or involves coercion or control.

Most of all, remember that things can and do get better.



It's difficult to cope with your feelings when you find out that your child has been sexually abused, let alone coping with your child's difficult and challenging behaviour.

It's usual for children who've experienced sexual abuse to show some kind of difficult behaviour, and this can be for a whole range of reasons including feeling insecure, confused, or worried about what has happened.

These behaviours can develop at any point from immediately after a disclosure to years later.

As children grow so does their understanding of the world and their experience of abuse may affect them more at different stages of their lives; for example when they hit puberty or start having relationships. They could also face issues and situations which reminds them of the abuse.

Advice from carers


“Show you are strong, even if you’re not feeling it.”

“Keep giving them support and keep telling them that it is not their fault. It is the abuser who is at fault.”

“The experience that they are going through does end and you do get on with your life eventually.”

“Tell them no matter what has happened, you’ll always love them and be there for them. I wish I’d been able to say this to my children at the time.”

“That you love them very much and it is not their fault, and they are being very brave.”



You may feel that you need to seek some counselling and advice.

This is not a failure on your part, but rather a sign that you are facing up to things by seeking help.

Looking after you

Supporting your child following an experience of sexual abuse can be very demanding especially as you cope with their distress, confusion and behaviour.

You also need space to talk about and reflect upon your feelings. It may be particularly difficult if you have had similar experiences as a child.

You may find that you have very good support networks amongst family and friends. If your child's disclosure has caused separations within the family it may be that your support networks are more limited.

Some people find that they can develop their own ways of dealing with their feelings. One parent said: "Sometimes it is good to take up a hobby that might help with the frustrations you feel inside; swimming, or squash as I did, taking the time to walk in beautiful surroundings ... then you can have a peaceful time to reflect on things and work things through in your own mind."

Supporting your child following an experience of sexual abuse can be very demanding especially as you cope with their distress, confusion and behaviour.

Family Action's Post Sexual Abuse Service

The PSA service gives children the chance to explore their thoughts and feelings around their experiences of abuse in a safe place.

The PSA service uses a variety of ways to help children explore their worries or concerns, dependent on their age/ability and interests, such as artwork, writing, worksheets, stories, puppets or toys. Establishing a good therapeutic relationship is central to our approach at the PSA Service.

The aim of therapeutic support is to improve wellbeing and mental health and look at new ways of coping and regaining control. We aim to support the child and their primary carers to improve their relationships. If you would like support from us, you will find our contact details on inside cover of this guide or visit our webpage:

www.family-action.org.uk/psa

This service is available in Leicester, Leicestershire, and Rutland

GLOSSARY

CEOP	Child Exploitation and Online Protection www.ceop.police.uk
Child	The term child is used within this booklet to refer to children and young people under the age of 18 years old.
CH-ISVA	Children's Independent Sexual Violence Advisor
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
Disclosure	When a child shares new information that they have been sexually abused
NSPCC	National Society for the Protection of Children Against Cruelty www.nspcc.org.uk
PSA	Post Sexual Abuse Service



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