

Supporting Children With Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse

1. Definition

Child sexual abuse in a family environment refers to situations where a child is sexually abused or harmed by a family member, relative, family friend, or caregiver. This type of abuse often occurs in settings where the child feels safe. It involves any sexual activity imposed on a child, whether through physical contact or non-contact.

2. Understanding Intrafamilial Child Abuse

Research tells us that sexual abuse within the family environment starts at an earlier age and is often continued over a longer period than when the offender is outside of the family. Intrafamilial abuse is also linked with other types of sexual offences, in particular the production and distribution of child abuse material.

Typically girls will be three times more likely to disclose than boys, and disabled children were found to be twice as likely to be sexually abused than non-disabled children.

At least 1 in 10 children will be sexually abused before the age of 16.

3. Why Abuse Goes Unreported

The 'I wanted them all to notice' report published by The Child Safeguarding Review Panel November 2024 gives key insights into how serious child sexual abuse in a family environment is reported and responded to by safeguarding agencies and professionals. The report identified that in many of the cases examined, professionals had failed to create sufficient opportunities for the child to tell them what was happening in their lives. Main findings:

- Professionals from across the multi agency system struggle to identify and understand when there is risk of harm
- There must be better join-up between the criminal justice and child safeguarding responses to child sexual abuse
- Children and families not receiving the support help and protection they need throughout sexual abuse investigations
- Improve assessment of people presenting risk of sexual harm to prevent further offending

7. Reflection

- Think about your practice and what needs to change so that the needs, voices and experiences of children who are sexually abused or at risk of being sexually abused are better addressed?
- Upskill your training and knowledge on child sexual abuse in a family environment via attending a lite bite training session
- If you believe that a child is at risk of or experiencing sexual abuse, please speak with your safeguarding lead and/or contact CSC: 01226 772423

6. Information sharing

Where there are concerns of child sexual abuse within families, the response is often led by the criminal justice system. We need all agencies to work better together to keep children's best interests at the heart of all enquiries and investigations and keeping children and families appropriately informed of the progress and outcome.

When the criminal threshold is not met, action from agencies often ceases. This can leave children feeling disbelieved or at further risk. It is vital agencies continue with the ongoing support and information provided regarding the rationale of the decisions.

5. Understanding Risk and Raising Concerns

Practitioners to be able to utilise their skills and be confident to act, quickly to safeguard and support children, which includes understanding how to talk directly to children and families about concerns of sexual abuse.

Exploring sexual abuse becomes lost in sight, especially where other concerns are present such as neglect or physical abuse. Professional curiosity is needed to explore and focus on the individual child with regards to symptoms and behaviours which may indicate a child is being sexually abused.

4. Hidden Abuse

Practitioners should not assume that children will disclose sexual abuse, as it often remains hidden or within other vulnerabilities such as another form of abuse, neglect, disability or cultural needs. Many children do not recognise the abuse or understand that it is wrong because perpetrators may normalise the behaviour, use threats, or blame the child. Parents, may show 'disguised compliance' rather than been seen as potential victims of coercive control or grooming.

