

Sexual abuse

Out of the 4 categories of abuse and which are; neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse....sexual abuse is the fourth most common initial category of abuse for children who are likely to be supported by children services, statutory interventions and engagement.

Definition of sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is any sexual activity with a child. You should be aware that many children and young people who are victims of sexual abuse do not recognise themselves as such. A child may not understand what is happening and may not even understand that it is wrong. Sexual abuse can have a long-term impact on mental health.

Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.

'What to do if you're worried a child is being abused – advice for practitioners' HM Government (2015)

What data and statistics tell us about sexual abuse against children.

Over a third of police – recorded sexual offences are against children. Police record a sexual offence when it is reported to them, or when they discover a sexual offence may have taken place through their own investigations.

Some criminal offences can only be perpetrated against children. Police records of these offences can give us a sense of the level of sexual offences against children. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the relevant offences are:

- rape of a child under 13
- rape of a child under 16
- sexual assault on a child under 13
- sexual activity involving a child under 13
- sexual activity involving a child under 16
- sexual grooming
- abuse of position of trust (offence against under 18's)
- abuse of children through sexual exploitation (offence under 18's)

Other considerations regarding sexual abuse are:

- The number of police recorded child sexual offences is increasing.
- Significant and increasing numbers of sexual abuse involves on-line activity.
- Child sexual exploitation figures continue to rise.
- Girls are more likely to experience sexual abused than boys.
- Older children are more likely to be sexually abused than younger children.
- Over 90% of sexually abused children were abused by someone they knew.

Statistic briefing: child sexual abuse – NSPCC (2019)

What might sexual abuse look like for children in the early years?

- A child who is withdrawn and fearful
- A child who displays inappropriate, sexualised conduct or behaviour
- A child engaging in sexualised play, particularly role play in young children
- The use of sexual language applied contextually
- Pain or itching of genital area
- Continual and inappropriate or excessive masturbation
- Self-harm (including eating disorder)
- A child who shows anxiety or unwillingness to remove clothes (for intimate care or changing reasons)
- Physical symptoms such as injuries to the genital or anal area, bruising to buttocks, abdomen and thighs
- Urinary infections
- Sexually transmitted disease