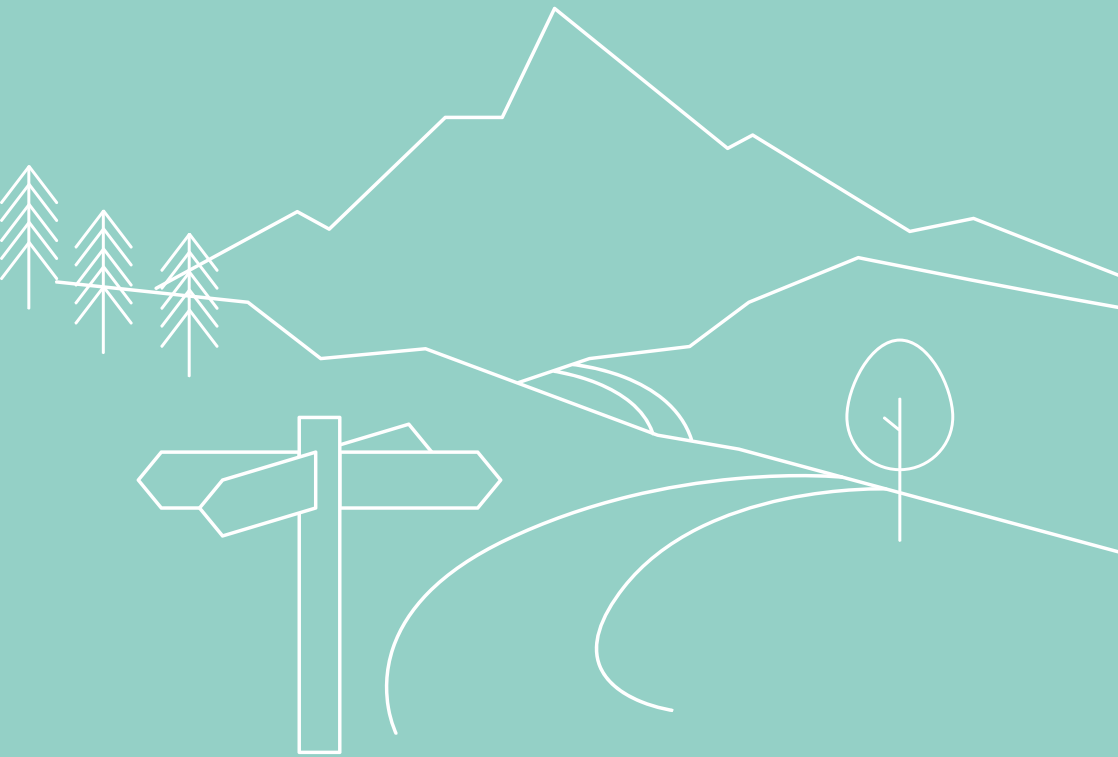




# The Parent & Carer Support Guide

A handbook for the journey following sexual abuse




**For parents and carers, by parents and carers  
who have walked the path before you**



# Dear Reader...

From parents and carers who have been where you are right now. *You aren't alone.* This booklet is about what we know now that we wish we'd known then, when we first discovered that abuse had taken place.

 The journey you make to a new normal won't be a straight line.








Don't tackle reading this all in one go – go to what's most needed now – like a 'Choose your own adventure' book. Read whatever you need – but don't skip over the chapter about caring for yourself. And don't throw this away!

***“The quotes are things we are happy to share directly with you, they are based on our experiences of being a parent or carer in this situation.”***

Do you feel... numb / angry / ashamed / confused / overwhelmed / guilty / depressed / alone? We've been there. Anything you feel isn't wrong.

From people who know. You are not alone. This can – and does – happen to anyone. By reading this you're already starting to help yourself and your child. Keep this book to hand – it might feel too much to read just now but you can come back to it over time.

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## Taking care of yourself

← Don't skip this bit!

**"Find your own ways of coping and be a little selfish about your self-care. It's natural to feel guilty for this but it's a marathon not a sprint, and you need to mentally stay in shape to help your child. Give yourself permission to take time off from the trauma."**

It's like a bereavement.

Life is never the same again, but you do find a way through.

Give yourself time to grieve.

Make sure that you are as well as you can be.

How you feel matters.

By taking care of you, you're taking care of them.



### Keep a diary or journal

It can be helpful to write things down. Also, things will and do change, and it is useful to be able to look back.

**"There is no right or wrong way of coping. Even three years on I still feel I'm winging this most of the time."**



### Try to find someone you trust to talk to

You can't shoulder this alone. This person could be a professional or someone in your personal network – there is some more advice on this on page 10.

**"Sometimes I didn't even know what I felt. But I found that hard physical work sometimes really helped"**



## Advice on what can help at home

**“You can’t fix everything, even if you want to. Some times the most powerful thing you can do as a parent or carer is just to be there and reassure them it’s ok to feel whatever it is they feel.”**

### PRACTICAL TIPS



Have some kind of relaxing activity out and easy to access at home – a colouring book is great.

Try to take some time out for your self care. By doing this you are showing your child that they also deserve to care for themselves.

Find something physical to do sometimes to use up all the energy that’s there in so many difficult feelings – painting walls, baking, digging...



Give your child **choices** – they’ve experienced a real lack of choice and need to regain a sense of control and their choice mattering – these choices will depend on your child and their age. But for example:

- Let them help you choose who and how you tell family/their school/friends
- Let them explore their views on whether to proceed with a police investigation. The choice of whether to report or not is yours as a family, and it’s important to help them feel they were listened to.




### Worry jar/worry book:

*“We have a jar she decorated. If she had a bad thought or a worry she would write it and put it in the jar. When she was ready, she’d empty the jar out and we would talk it through”*



*“She had a worry book under her bed and she would write her worries in there. I would read it when she was at school and write something in response. Sometimes this was easier than talking face to face”*

### Have a safe space:

 *“For us, it was important to have some places not tainted by this experience. So, a room, a club, an activity where we don’t speak about it and we’re just as normal as possible – we make sure we keep that separate.”*

## LISTENING AND TALKING

Give them space. Wait for conversations to start rather than asking questions - they will talk when they are ready - and usually at a moment when you are not!

You don't have to sit opposite each other to talk - find a comfortable way to talk, like a car journey, a dog walk, chat while washing up.



Be prepared to listen when they open up and talk.

**You don't have to have any answers** - it's easy to be in 'fix' mode and try to make things better. There isn't really a fix for this - but really actively listening and acknowledging what they are going through you can help them feel understood and not alone. It is hard, but it's really important.

Set aside some time to talk if needed - especially if you can't talk when they are ready to.

**"Make a time when they know you are available and they can come to you to talk if they want to. (This can also help if you find they want to suddenly speak at bedtime, try finding a time earlier in the evening which you can set aside to talk together)"**



**"As parents and carers we want to mend and fix, it's how we are programmed.**

**This is what is so hard when there isn't something we can do to take away the painful feelings. The most powerful thing we can do though is to listen, sit with them and validate how they feel and answer their questions as honestly as we can."**

### IMPORTANT:

Leading questions - if your child's case is going through the justice system, it's important that you don't ask leading questions. If you're not sure what this means, do talk it through with your child's CYPsVA - see page 20.

**"CYPsVAs are also happy to help and support with any of the police terminology which some parents, carers or children may find uncomfortable or confusing."**



## OVER TIME AND THE BIGGER PICTURE

Every child is different. Your child might take a long time before they are ready to talk.



What they need and are able to talk about will also change over time – sometimes things become more difficult at times of change, such as moving schools, starting puberty, starting a new relationship.

Your child might choose to talk to others before talking with you (friends, adults at school, counsellors). This can feel really hard as a parent or carer, but it's important to try to respect and follow their lead. Often young people tell us that they did not want to hurt their family's feelings, so don't see it as a criticism if they choose not to share the details of what happened with you.

***“This can be really hard and feel quite rejecting, try not to take it personally, and focus on the fact they ARE talking, and not bottling this up.”***

There are lots of ways you can get support. Therapy can be really helpful, and so can other services and groups – anything that helps rebuild self-confidence and connection.



The waiting list for support services can be long, so even if your child doesn't want support just yet, it may be worth joining the waiting list to keep options open for when they are ready.

***“Take each day as it comes.”***

***“It's Ok not to know what you're doing – none of us do, but we do find a way through.”***

Don't be surprised if your child acts younger than their age – regression can be a very normal response to a traumatic experience. It may be useful for them to have times and spaces where they can act like a younger part of themselves. Try to parent this part of them in a nurturing way, as you would a younger child.

***Keep reading this paragraph to remind yourself – it's important!***



## Who to tell & how to tell them

**“Although no one else has walked in your shoes, there are others who walk the same path, feel the same guilt, shame and isolation. You aren’t on your own. Finding someone to help you carry the load without judgement is the most valuable thing you can have.”**



You will need support, and you can't carry this alone. At the same time, once you tell someone, you can't 'untell' them.



It's really important to think carefully about who you tell in your own family and friendship network. Some people find it hard to manage emotionally and you can end up 'looking after' them.

Remember it's your child's story to tell, so it might be important to speak with your child about who you talk to about what's happened and what you share with them – from family friends to adults at their school. It might help them to feel that there's a bigger circle of support too.

**“When you tell someone what happened, you can also tell them what it is you need from them. It might be that you want them to know what's happened, but treat you and your child completely the same. It might be that you want them to check in with you but not all the time.”**

**“I needed a few weeks off work. I told my manager but needed a 'cover story' for colleagues. I told them I'd had a bereavement.”**






## Telling siblings

So much depends on age and circumstances, but it's important to acknowledge that something has happened.

***“We told him that she had been seriously hurt and the police were helping. That was enough for him, he didn't need to know all the detail.”***



It is helpful for all of you to try maintaining your family's normal routine as much as possible. Keeping the same rules and boundaries where possible can help sibling relationships continue as normal.

 Doing some normal things as a family – and making sure that you are spending quality time with your other children too – is really important.

Getting some support from services and others who have been through something similar can be easier in some ways. See the resources page.



**“Don’t be shy to challenge the school to step up their support. I’ve learned how physical the effects of trauma can be, and for my daughter that has meant needing extra help at school. Trust your instincts about the support your child needs.”**

### Home and school working closely together

You know your child best and you are the best person to advocate for what they need. This can be so hard when our world is turned upside down, but just go with your gut/instincts and challenge the school to keep thinking about what your child needs from them to feel safe.



Can there be a key link person for the family and the young person?

Work with the school to make a plan, but also to know it might change day-to-day. Ask the school to have regular meetings with you to change the plan if needed.

**“Make sure the school documents the plan in writing so you and your child know what you can expect.”**

**“It might be useful to invite a friend, CYPSVA or social worker to these meetings to help loop up support.”**



Make sure to check with your child if they are happy for other professionals

like social workers to come into school to meet them. Some are happy with this but others want to keep school separate from what’s happening outside of school.

Challenge the school if you or your child feel that they are not being sensitive or discrete with meetings in the school.

## Helping school to be trauma-informed so that they can respond in the best way

Schools can vary in the level of understanding and training they hold around sexual abuse. Ask if key staff working with your child have some training around trauma.



Some useful resources for schools from The Anna Freud Centre / Mentally

Healthy Schools are:

[www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/trauma/trauma/](http://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/trauma/trauma/)

The SARSAS Self-Help Guide to supporting a victim of sexual abuse  
[www.sarsas.org.uk/support-and-information](http://www.sarsas.org.uk/support-and-information)

**“The best bit of information we learnt was how trauma feels like a live event. Trauma has a very real impact physically, socially and emotionally. The school needed to understand this too so they could help our daughter and understand her triggers.”**



Keep things normal but realise they're not. School is one stable place when everything else is changing - that can be comforting.

Don't treat the child differently, but don't be surprised if your child's behaviour changes or they act younger than they did before.



Just like at home, giving the young person some control over their support plan can help them to feel safe.

**“Allowing the child some control in their space like choosing where they sit or extra time in tests and resetting expectations on homework, can help them cope a little better.”**

**“Encourage school to understand that if they make a promise they need to keep it! Trust has been broken so it's crucial to rebuild it.”**



## Other support the school can explore with you and your child:



**'Leave the room' card:** can help your child excuse themselves without having to explain and gather their thoughts



Your child may also find having a designated **safe space** useful if they are overwhelmed



**'Consider a Weekly Check in** with a **Safe Adult** - if possible let your child have some choice in who this might be. It doesn't necessarily need to be a safeguarding lead.



Talk to the school about academic support too. This might include **Exam Access Arrangements** like extra time or a separate room to sit tests.



Ask if your school has a **Student information sheet** that captures a young person's support plan. They might be called something different like a Student Passport. This helps teachers support the young person without the need for full disclosure.



Can the school provide any other therapeutic support like **THRIVE** sessions or **play therapy**? Can they link up with other specialist support services like the **School Counsellor** or Off The Record?

## Change expectations around learning



For some children school and schoolwork is an escape from thinking about what happened. For others it is another requirement on them when they are struggling emotionally. If you feel your child is getting exhausted or overwhelmed by schoolwork and expectations, speak to the school. They may agree to a part time timetable or to relieve the pressure of expectations on them.

Your child deserves all the support that they can be given, especially when it comes to exams. Schools can apply for extra time or different access arrangements around the exams.

**“Education is important but it’s not the only thing going on.”**

**“Consider making a little box for your child to access if a panic attack or anxiety happens – this could contain anything that helps to ground them like a fidget or chewie toy, something that smells like a lavender rollerball or some of your perfume – find what works at home and make a kit to keep at school to help your child in times of panic.”**

## Sharing information and raising awareness with teachers

Be mindful which teachers know – let the child know what you or their key adult in school are sharing with their teachers, so that they feel informed and part of the decision.

Give general guidance (eg, ‘child is suffering from a traumatic event, please be mindful around triggers of themes like x, y and z’) but not necessarily all the details.



Ensure the key adult looks at the curriculum for any potential triggers, especially in PSHE, English, tutor time or assembly. It might be worth looking at curriculum for next steps too - for example A Level choices due to set texts.



# Resources for support



## Headspace

A mindfulness guide for your everyday life. Learn meditation and mindfulness skills. Including for managing stress and anxiety to sleep, focus, and mind-body health. ↩

*“This is a paid app but we found it useful to us and our child. Helped with meditation and sleep”*



## WellMind

A free NHS mental health and wellbeing app designed to help with stress, anxiety and depression.



## We Stand

We Stand offers a range of support services and info for families affected by child sexual abuse. All services are accessed via their national helpline. 0800 980 1958 <https://westand.org.uk/>



## The Bridge

The Bridge SARC has a 24/7 recovery helpline 01173426999.



## Beat Panic

Is designed to guide you through a panic attack or raised anxiety.



## Feeling Good

This programme combines deep relaxation with Olympic sports techniques which develop deep relaxation to calm your body and mind and lift your mood.



## The Somerset Phoenix Project

The Somerset Phoenix Project specialises in supporting children and young people affected by sexual abuse [somersexphoenixproject.org.uk](http://somersexphoenixproject.org.uk)

While their services are only for children and young people in Somerset, their website has a very useful Guide for Parents and Carers and another for Children and Young People. Both are quite long but packed with useful information in it.



## SurvivorsUK

Survivors UK provide a national online helpline for boys, men, and non-binary people aged 13+ who have experienced sexual violence at any time in their lives. They also offer emotional support to family and friends supporting them. [www.survivorsuk.org](http://www.survivorsuk.org)



More resources available on [the-green-house.org.uk](http://the-green-house.org.uk), including those focusing on particular symptoms like self harm and panic.



## SARSAS

SARSAS, or Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Abuse Support, have created an online tool to help professionals and concerned others signpost people living with the consequences of rape and sexual abuse to access the excellent specialist organisations across the region. The website covers services throughout Bath, Bristol, North Somerset, Somerset & South Gloucestershire. The referral pathway can be found here: [survivorpathway.org.uk](http://survivorpathway.org.uk).

The SARSAS Self-Help Guide for Families is aimed at people supporting adults and those over 14 years old  
[www.sarsas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SARSAS-Self-Help-Guide\\_Families20.pdf](http://www.sarsas.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SARSAS-Self-Help-Guide_Families20.pdf)

**“Great support booklet to help those supporting a survivor. We shared with school and with close friends”**

SARSAS also offer a helpline for people of any gender 13+ affected by sexual abuse – for young people and those supporting them: 0808 801 0464 / 0808 801 0456



## Womankind

Womankind is a Bristol based organisation offering help to women and girls affected by sexual abuse. Their Helpline and webchat are for women and girls aged 16 and above anywhere in the UK: [www.womankindbristol.org.uk](http://www.womankindbristol.org.uk)

Helpline: 0117 916 6461 or 0345 458 2914; Webchat service: accessible on the website. Womankind’s counselling service is from 18 years old with a Bristol postcode.



## Complex Trauma Resources:

Beacon House is one site with lots of resources about understanding complex trauma in children: [beaconhouse.org.uk/resources](http://beaconhouse.org.uk/resources)

**“There is SO much here which is great but quite ‘academic’ so might be daunting if you’re not in the right space. In the Child and Family Mental Health part we liked:**

- ‘The simple and safe questions for talking about upsetting things’ Might be useful for smaller children
- ‘Survival: Fight/flight – what are you feeling’ Good for older kids to understand the physical effects of trauma
- ‘Building resilience training aid’ was also a good read.”



# What to expect from different services

*After sexual abuse of your child has been raised as a concern*

## **Remember:**

With any service involved with your family, remember that you have choices as a family about what is right for you at this time. Don't be afraid to challenge decisions made or raise your concerns if you feel something isn't right.

## **Children's Social Care**

Children's social care are likely to be involved when someone discloses sexual abuse, and the referral to them may have come from you or a professional known to your child. Their job is to keep children safe.

They are likely to visit you and your child to understand what life is like and what they can do to support you moving forward



In many cases children's social care, the police and other professionals known to your child will have a meeting and share information about your child and the people or persons who have harmed your child. They will also think about other children who may be at risk. This meeting is not one that parents or carers attend.

In many cases after 3-4 weeks children social care may have an initial child protection conference for your child with

other professionals to which you and your child will be invited and supported to attend. This involves deciding what is best way to move forward for your child.

**"Make a list of everyone who comes to the door – it's difficult to remember who does what and how they could help both now and later. Accept any offers of help you can and then decide what works for you later."**

## **Criminal justice**

It's likely that the police will want to visit, with or without children's social care. They will want to ask a few questions of you and/or your child to check 'when, where, who and what' to make sure your child is safe, other children are safe, and guide what could be the first steps of an investigation.



The police will often want to undertake a video recorded interview ('achieving best evidence interview') with your child. This may happen within hours to days for older children or may take some weeks to arrange. They may ask for the help of an intermediary who is a communication expert and can help the police ask the questions in the right way for children of all ages and abilities.

You will be allowed to accompany your child to the interview but not to be present for the interview itself.



A police investigation may take some time. The person or people of concern may be arrested and released with or without bail (certain 'rules' about what they can do including who they can have contact with or stay with), or they may be arrested and charged with the crime. It may take some time (weeks or months) before they are charged. This is while the police gather evidence and then present the evidence to the Crown Prosecution Service who decide whether a charge can be issued. Once someone is charged with a crime they will be heard in a court. Sometimes the decision is made not to charge someone. You should be given feedback on why this decision has been made and there is a right to appeal this.



## Health

You should be offered an opportunity for any health concerns you and your child may have to be addressed. This may be a medical examination with a specialist children's clinician and may be offered to you to take place at a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) or at a children's clinic. The timing of this will depend on how long ago the abuse happened but should be offered within days to 2/3 weeks. Any examinations will be child-centred and focused on their wants and expectations. For older children they may then be signposted or referred to sexual health services to make sure they are healthy and well.

You can also access your local GP who can refer you to other services.



## Psychological support

Psychological services and emotional support should also be offered to you and your child. What this looks like depends on what other agencies your child may be involved with (e.g CAMHS) and the age of your child.

**What a lot of information!  
Now go and have a cuppa.**



There is an advocacy service available for every young person who has or has yet to report to police – accessing this is a right for any young person in Bristol, Avon and Somerset.

If you are not yet connected to a Child and Young Persons Sexual Violence Advocate (CYPSVA) please contact Safelink [www.safelinksupport.co.uk](http://www.safelinksupport.co.uk) 0333 323 1543

## **What is a CYPSVA and how do they work?**

Child and Young Persons Sexual Violence Advocates (CYPSVAs) are trained in line with Home Office guidance and can work directly with the child or young person as well as provide support to the family. They can meet with the child or young person wherever they feel most comfortable, which could be at home, school, a café or outdoor area. They can provide a safe space to talk, emotional support, help to communicate with school, college or other professionals.

The CYPSVAs help young people feel safe and supported through the police process and beyond. They understand how scary or confusing it can be and do their best to help the young person understand what is happening, helping them to ask questions and talk to the police if needed.

A CYPSVA can also support young people regardless of if they have reported an incident or not. It's important that a young person's voice is always heard.

CYPSVAs also refer into other services such as support groups, counselling, creative groups, substance abuse services and many more – depending on what the child or young person needs and wants. They also signpost families to other specialist services and helplines.



CYPSVAs support the child or young person throughout the court process, helping them feel safe and understand what is happening. They understand that the end of the court case can be difficult and, where the child or young person would like this, they provide some support after all criminal justice proceedings have finished.









**This leaflet was created by parents and carers of children and young people who were referred to The Green House following experiences of sexual abuse.**

**Our goal is to share the information that we felt was most helpful through our journey in one place. We want to share with you what helped us. And more than anything we want you to know that you are not alone.**

