



Sexual Abuse, Schools, Safety & Support

Guidance for Education Staff from
people with lived experiences





The Green House is the specialist support service for children, young people and families impacted by sexual abuse in Avon and Somerset.

We offer individual therapies, family support and a range of groups.

Support for Professionals

We also offer support for professionals to build their confidence and skills in working with children, young people and their families who have experienced sexual abuse.

This can include advice, resources, and space to think with a trauma-informed lens.

To refer young people, families please go to the-green-house.org.uk/request-for-support

To request support as a professional please email info@the-green-house.org.uk

Why did we create this guidance?

"I sometimes felt like a guinea-pig, like school was making it up as they went along. It would have felt better if they'd worked some of it out first."

- *Young Person*

We know that schools want to support children to be able to engage well in their learning and relationships, but that staff sometimes struggle to know what to do.

This guide is designed to help. Young people, parents and carers with lived experience wanted to share what worked for them or what could have made a difference.

This guide is a mix of:

- Lived experience: The reflections and suggestions about education settings by young people who have experienced sexual abuse and assault, and by the parents and carers who support them.
- Best practice: links to guidance and resources from Bristol and further away.

This guidance has been made by young people and parents in the VOICE Project of The Green House in collaboration with Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership, Young Empowered Women project at the Women's Centre Cornwall, and with survivors and educational professionals who came to the Beyond Therapy Festival of Activism Against Child Sexual Abuse, February 2024.

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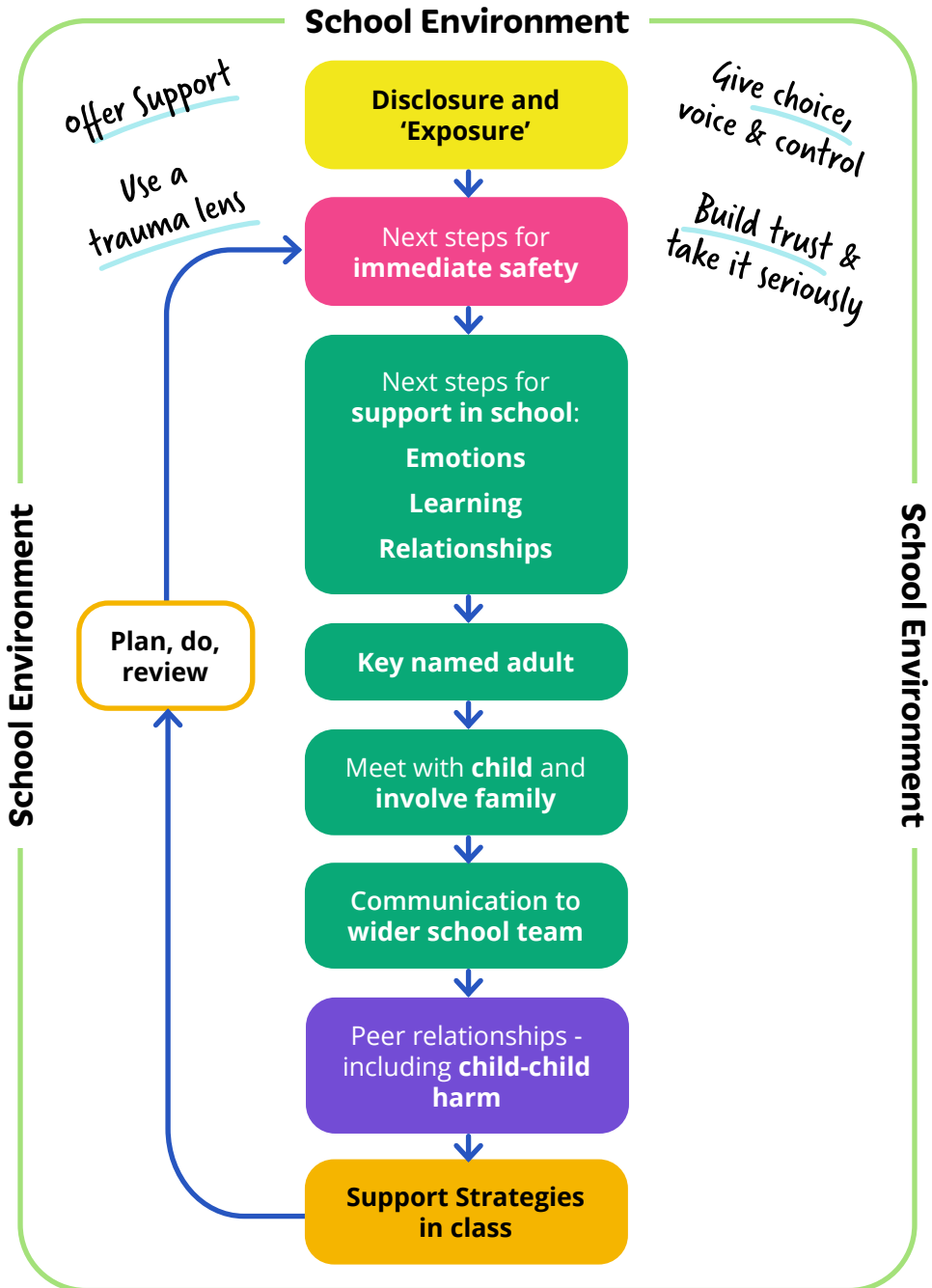
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Throughout this document, quotes from lived experiences marked with a green icon/line are from parents or caregivers, those shown with a pink icon/line are from young people.

Guidance Map for the journey



1 KEY THEMES

Offer Support



"Don't be passive
– actively build respect, empathy and understanding. Don't wait for things to go wrong and then have an assembly about it."

– Young person



"Remember there will be people in every classroom with experience of sexual harm. My school puts out a warning about the content anyway – that means it doesn't single you out, and it means you're thinking of the people who haven't been able to step forward."

– Young person



"When someone has the courage to speak about what's happened to them, at that point actively offer some support – don't expect them to come back and ask. That's asking them to take another step. And then continue that support – it's not a month-long thing. Give them support until they say they don't need it." – Young person



"I don't remember anyone ever asking me if I needed any help. I hated myself. It felt like no one gave a sh*t about me. It was years, and a new school, before an adult really asked if things were ok." – Young Person

1 KEY THEMES

Build **trust** & take it seriously



"Because of the shock it can be hard to believe it happened to you, so having someone take you seriously helps you to take yourself seriously."

– Young person



"Remember it's a long journey. I wish my school didn't act like it was something I'd get over in a few weeks." – Young person



"The biggest thing is trust, because this has been so broken already. If you say you're going to do something please do it." – Parent



Resources

[🔗 Youngminds - How to be a good listener](https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/how-to-be-a-good-listener/)

www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/how-to-be-a-good-listener/
(really good resource, very practical and actionable advice, includes quotes from young people, clear dos & don'ts at the end of the page)

1 KEY THEMES

Give choice, voice & control



"Wherever you can give a choice, do – children have had their choices taken away. It's so important, especially after something like sexual abuse." – *Parent*



"Choice doesn't mean that anything goes – often offering between options A and B can already feel very relieving." – *Parent*



"Sharing information with adults in school is important – but involve your student in deciding what gets shared and with who"
– *Young Person*



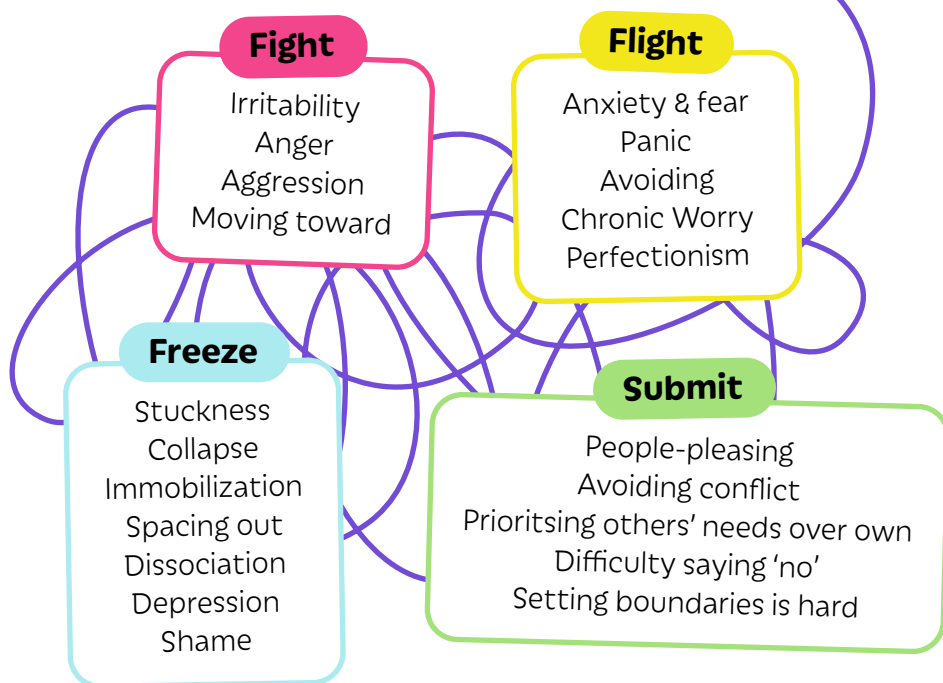
1 KEY THEMES

Use a trauma lens

The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable. It demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous, ever-present past.

Bessel van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score.

Traumatic experience, like that of child sexual abuse and sexual assault, can have a profound effect on children and young people - their inner state and their outer behaviour. This might look like:



Trauma-informed practice is not designed to treat trauma-related difficulties. It seeks to remove the barriers that those affected by trauma can experience when accessing care and services by using the principles of trauma-informed practice: **safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment** and **inclusivity**. bristolsafeguarding.org



"Talking about and normalising the impact of trauma can reduce the shame – I didn't realise that was why I was feeling and acting so different." –

Young Person



"Some more understanding about trauma from school would have made a huge difference. The worst thing was my child getting told she was 'misbehaving' and 'not trying hard enough'"

– Parent



"The biggest help for us as parents was understanding that trauma presents itself in the present, not just the past. It means experiencing the present as full of threat. Helping all staff understand more about how trauma presents would be a huge help to traumatised children." – *Parent*

When things go wrong



"Mistakes do happen, adults can get things wrong or make things worse. The most helpful thing is to acknowledge it, own it as the adult, and adjust the plan. Apologise (to build trust), and if possible be transparent with home too - school doing that with us helped us work together to change things" - Parent



"I kept getting sent to isolation or told I was rude for shutting down. It felt like punishment came quickly but no sense of understanding.. in the end I just stopped going to school altogether" - Young Person

Trauma Resources:

[🔗 Sowing Seeds: Trauma Informed Practice for Anyone Working with Children and Young People](https://vimeo.com/334642616) (Scottish Government video)

vimeo.com/334642616

[🔗 Moving from Behavioural to Relational responses in School](https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Behavioural-to-Relational-Responses-at-School.pdf)
beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Behavioural-to-Relational-Responses-at-School.pdf

[🔗 BNSSG Trauma Informed Practice Framework](https://bristolsafeguarding.org/media/dlhebkr/bnssg-trauma-informed-practice-framework-2024.pdf)
bristolsafeguarding.org/media/dlhebkr/bnssg-trauma-informed-practice-framework-2024.pdf

2

School Environment and a 'whole school approach'

Model respect and consent in all relationships

"I think a good school should model how you treat individuals in a relationship - modelling kindness, respect and consent - staff and students."

"Respect from top to bottom, senior to junior, authority to learners. It's hard to trust or hear messages about consent if you see power dynamics playing out in oppressive ways."



"Modelling respect and healthy relationships is fundamental. Challenging sexist and misogynistic comments needs to happen by adults and not be left to children"

Cultivate space for difference and acceptance



"Feeling vulnerable or 'different' is often hard in school anyway. A more supportive culture which recognises that people act differently and need different things would help people after trauma – it helps people who might struggle to sit still in class, who get panicky or quiet or miss chunks of the school day to feel included and welcome." – *Young Person*



"The NSPCC Pants campaign in primary school was really important. It was the first time she was able to speak about what was happening." – *Parent*



"Don't measure kids' value by the grades they get – try to recognise that they're doing the best they can." – *Parent*

Actively invite discussion and educate about consent in sex and relationships



"Change the RHSE curriculum to explore healthy relationships and what consent really means – I feel like I had to work that out for myself with no input from school."

– *Young Person*



"Sex and consent felt like such a taboo subject – like no adults were comfortable talking about it or addressing it." – *Young Person*

The tea video! Where to begin?

It's quite damaging to compare sexual assault to an unwanted cup of tea – it can make someone feel that what's happened to them isn't really a big deal and doesn't really matter.

Maybe for primary aged children it's a good start, but we need to talk about actual sexual consent. It's an uncomfortable conversation but it needs to be had.

But for a secondary teacher to only use that video is not enough – and if that is all you learn that is awful.

It needs to be more complex and address common myths, including:

- ✗ Coercion – a reluctant yes – is assault.
- ✗ Removing a condom during sex without consent is assault.
- ✗ If you consent earlier and then you don't, or you're asleep – that's an assault


Watch





Build a whole school approach to sexism, misogyny and sexual harassment

Build all staff confidence in addressing harassing behaviour - building a school culture needs more than giving an assembly

 "My school disciplined people who were sexist and harrassing. I think this set a really good example of having standards of respect, and not dismissing comments as 'banta'." – *Young Person*

 "My daughter is 12. It felt like the teachers did not understand that she would need adult support in challenging misogyny. Adults need to model this confidently. Don't leave it to children." – *Parent*

 "All staff should have the same training and standards on this – it feels like some teachers take it seriously and others don't – there should be consistency." – *Young Person*

 "Having external people come in really helps. You listen to them differently. You also need representative voices from different communities"

– *Young Person*





"We had a weekly assembly about the news and the school didn't speak about Sarah Everard being killed. We wanted to discuss it but were told we weren't allowed to make our own assembly. **It seemed like a fear from the school about talking about it – as if it was vulgar. It's so important to be talking about!** More confidence from teachers on this – we need to talk about it." – *Young Person*



Resources for misogyny and sexism:

Engaging Youth to Promote Healthy Masculinities and End Gender-Based Violence - Learning Network gbvlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/backgrounders/healthy-masculinities/

Mendable Podcast with Lewis Wedlock:

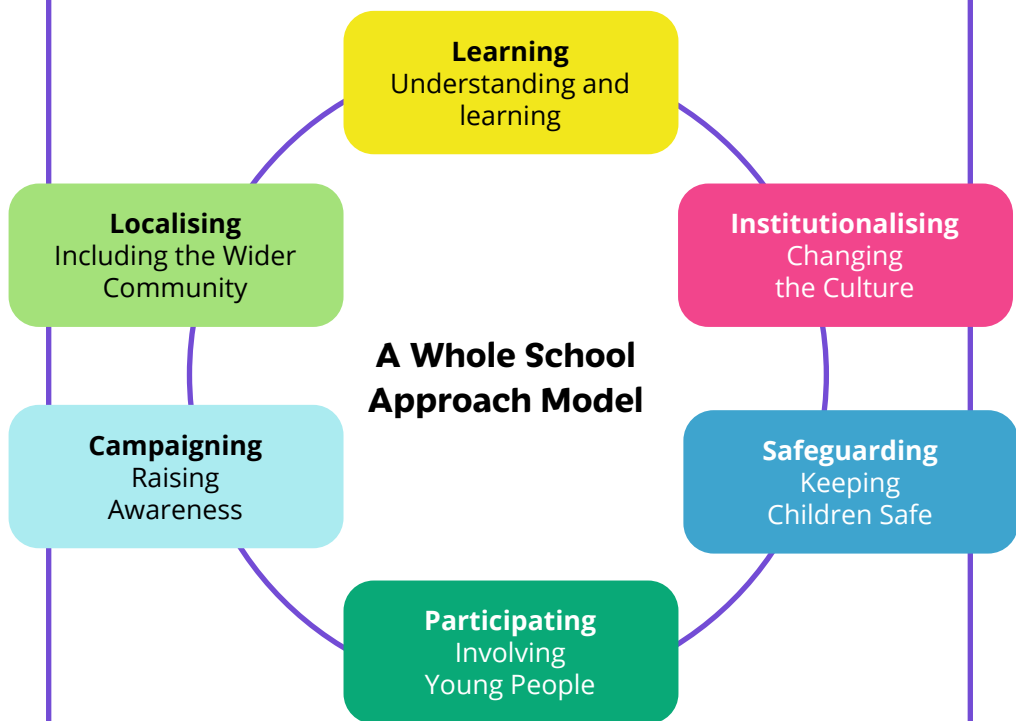
[Talking about 'toxic' masculinity in schools \(9 mins\)](#)

[Working with misogyny in schools – part 1 \(16 mins\)](#)

[Working with Misogyny in Schools Part 2 - Navigating Shame \(15 mins\)](#)

Everyone's Invited – Everyone's Invited now run training programmes for schools on subjects like tackling misogynistic media and rape culture in schools. www.everyonesinvited.uk/education

A **whole-school approach** means pro-actively working to raise awareness and cultures of safety and support. One model of this:



A Whole School Approach (WSA) model comprises of six core components:

- 1. Learning** - Understanding and learning about gender-based violence and its impact
- 2. Institutionalising**- Changing the culture throughout the school, sustainably.
- 3. Safeguarding** - Keeping children safe by taking a holistic and needs-led approach to safeguarding.
- 4. Participating** - Involving young people actively and meaningfully in the process.
- 5. Campaigning** - Raising awareness of gender-based violence and its causes.
- 6. Localising** - Including the wider community by working alongside external partners.

3

Disclosure & 'Exposure'

Young people with lived experience at the Young Empowered Women's (YEW) Project at the Women's Centre Cornwall developed this guidance for school professionals handling sexual abuse disclosures:

Availability

When there is a big assembly about something relevant, have a space available after, and **signpost someone who is available to speak**, not only immediately after but multiple times.

"I don't want to feel rushed when I am talking about this"

Try to **stay calm, slow down** and **show genuine care**.

Language

'I believe you' – lots of people are trained to say this. It can be important, but it's more important to show your belief and support through your actions following the disclosure as words can be doubted.

Avoid asking the child to **repeat their story** more than necessary.

"Saying it over and over can be painful"



Disclosures

Sharing information

Who knows, who is going to know, when will they be told?

Let the child know who you will tell.

For sharing in the school: Help them choose the language of what teachers or peers are told. Let them know who knows. Give them choice to be there when people are told.

"I stopped going to school because I didn't know who knew. I didn't want to be in maths not knowing whether my maths teacher knew."

"Everyone has a right to know who knows their business"

Being the 'chosen one'

If the child has chosen you to disclose to you it means you have earned their trust. That is so important. You might be caught off-guard, but reflect that they chose you to tell something so huge.


Try not to panic, talk with them about who you are going to tell, why, how and when.



Self-care is also really important for you/your staff. Hearing a disclosure might connect us to painful experiences of our own.

Some good resources for supporting staff wellbeing here: csapathway.uk/yourwellbeing.pdf

A tale of two responses

 "I brought up what happened to me in secondary school and no one did anything. It was like I hadn't said anything – no one checked anything or took it further. In my head it felt like it must not be important, so I kind of put it back in my head again.

And then in Post 16 it came up again with my head of year, just casually slipped out, and she took it seriously, took actions straight away, took me out of lessons that day. I felt scared but also felt like I was important. Like what had happened to me was important and not ok." – Young Person

Listen



Disclosure or Exposure?

The podcast 'Conversations We've Never Had' between two adult survivors of child sexual abuse describes disclosure as 'exposure' - the feeling of being extremely vulnerable having something so private and important known by others.

Imagine a secret you have never told anyone. Now imagine giving that to someone official without much information about what they will do with it. How do you feel? Hold that feeling in mind when you support someone who has made a disclosure.

Concerns with no disclosure

Evidence shows that most children who are being sexually abused do not tell anyone about it at the time. In fact, the average age of disclosure of child sexual abuse is around 40.*

The '**Signs and Indicators Framework**' is designed to help schools dynamically record concerns, from observations of the child and of those who may be abusing them. It does not 'diagnose' sexual abuse but helps professionals discuss and explore concerns and communicate these with other agencies.



Signs & Indicators Framework

From

"What's wrong with you?" to

"What's happened to you?"

If you notice a change in a child's behaviour, make sure a trusted adult asks them if something has happened that is upsetting them.

"I feel like if someone had asked me that question the whole shape of my life might have been different."

- Parent and adult survivor

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Next steps for Immediate Safety

Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership offers a Child Sexual Abuse Pathway to help professionals to make referrals and to understand what might happen next:



 csapathway.uk

Take care around where and how professional meetings happen in school:

 *"I had meetings with police in rooms with glass windows. It felt embarrassing and made me even more uncomfortable than I was already." – Young Person*

Signpost further help

The CSA Pathway document helps education staff know what might happen next – this can reduce anxiety for the child to know what to expect.

→ Check out support services available, for example [SafeLink](#) for the justice system, [The Green House](#) for emotional and social support.

→ As a parent it can be overwhelming too – see The Green House’s Parent and Carer Support Guide the-green-house.org.uk/articles-resources/parents-carers/

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Next steps for Support in School

Check out the CSA Centre of Expertise Guidance for schools around supporting learning, emotions and relationships:



csapathway.uk/education.pdf



Key named adult

It helps to have a key person in school who can help advocate for the child and be the link person with home and agencies.



"Sometimes the school gives you the name of a person but you don't know them and don't trust them. It's best if we can choose who our key person is. If that isn't possible, can they make some time to build the relationship?" - *Young Person*



"I really needed to feel there was someone who was there for me, who would listen and not judge. *It made such a difference when I finally found that person I could go talk to if I needed or if I was just having a bad day.*"

- *Young Person*



"*Things got so much better once there was a key team around my child who were empowered to make decisions.* It meant that if things happened over the school day they knew her well, could respond quickly, and could contact me directly. This made the difference between her coming home early most days and her being able to manage challenges and stay in school." - *Parent*



Make a plan – involve the child, work with non-abusing parents and carers, agree a plan and share it

Offer meetings from the start with the child and family together so they know we're all joined up in supporting them.



"When making a support plan, work with parents – they can provide insight into what works at home and where the flash points might be. We know our kids best." - Parent



"Ask for our input but also please bring ideas to the table – it can equally be stressful to be expected to make recommendations when we're struggling ourselves." - Parent

Be prepared to be flexible – what works today might not work tomorrow. Think of this as a journey rather than a 'once and done' activity. Evolve the plan as circumstances change and consider at each step whether the child is ready to be more actively involved in that process, make space for their voice.



Falling through the gaps

"Sometimes young people become dual registered in their mainstream school and in Alternative Provision or Hospital Education. It's important to liaise closely with the other education provider, as your responsibility is shared and children can fall through the gaps"

- Parent



Be Pro-active in following up



"Don't wait for things to go wrong – a key worker check in can remind the young person of their support plan, and it might be a good prompt to remind the teaching team or see if they need any more guidance." - Parent



"It made such a difference when someone checked in with me – even if things were going ok it made me feel I could tell someone if they weren't"

- Young Person

Communicating with the wider school

There can be a tension between sharing information with staff so they can be aware and supportive, and respecting the child's right to privacy.

Try to find a way to do this in collaboration with the child and/or parents – offering choices and voice is part of increasing a sense of safety and control. Staff don't need to know all the details but they need to know that something is going on and to be aware of triggers and what can help the child feel safe and comfortable again.



"My teacher showed me the email she sent to my teachers and we talked about the wording together until I was happy with it"- Young Person



"A plan only works if it's used by all the teachers, especially in secondary school where so many adults work with us across the day." - Young Person

Language



"Help all teachers be more aware of what language can sound like blaming and shaming (e.g about 'bad behaviour' or 'using what happened to you as an excuse')."- Parent



"My teacher gave me statistics about how common sexual assault is. It didn't feel helpful – better to focus on the individual in front of you."- Young Person

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Support Strategies in class

Having a place to go

Classrooms or crowds can be intense sensory and social environments. Having an alternative place to go to re-set can make a real difference. This could be a time-out room, a key adult's office or the library.



"I had a plan with lots of options for support if I was struggling, but sometimes none of them were possible. The important thing is having at least **one reliable place** you can go." - Young Person



"In my post 16 my head of year checked in first thing. If I was really struggling we would make a plan for the day or she would let my teachers know – it meant I didn't have to explain myself over and over again." - Young Person

Seating plans

Seating plans can make the difference of feeling able to manage in a classroom and not.



"I felt best sitting close to the door and at the back. When this was on my plan I felt much more comfortable going into class and staying there." - Young Person



Sensory box

Traumatic stress can mean seemingly small triggers can lead to panic and overwhelm, or to cutting off from feelings and spacing out.

Sensory boxes can help soothe and ground. Create one with the child - try a combination of something to **smell, touch, look at** and **do** - like a wordsearch or fiddle toys.



"My head of year gave me an aromatherapy stick that I could rub on my wrist - it really helped me come out of my head - it can help ground you" - *Young Person*



Cold-call questions

Concentration is frequently affected by traumatic stress, and many young people report 'freezing' at cold-call questions.



"on some days being asked to speak can just set everything off - I would so much rather have the choice of putting my hand up" - *Young Person*



"Everything got better when my plan said not to give me cold-call questions, I felt less on edge." - *Young Person*

Exam arrangements

Trauma can make resilience to ordinary stressors harder, so exam pressure and being in nervous noisy crowds can be very challenging.



"Having my own room and rest breaks made a massive difference to me. I went from going blank to being able to do the exam." - *Young Person*

Group work

Working in groups might be challenging for young people who have trouble trusting others. Awareness of this means teachers can support with oversight and breaking tasks into chunks.



Behavioural response vs relational responses

Some schools have strict behaviour policies which work for some children but can feel very triggering for children with traumatic stress. Can the school make some adjustments around these to account for knowledge we have about traumatic arousal? For example:

- A movement or sensory break
- Space to connect with an adult rather than isolation
- Reflecting on an incident when everyone is calmer, not at the time when highly aroused or shut down.

Check out the Beacon House resources on some tips for this [🔗 Moving from behavioural to relational responses in school](https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Behavioural-to-Relational-Responses-at-School.pdf) beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Behavioural-to-Relational-Responses-at-School.pdf

Research on how school discipline can impact mental health: [🔗 The Behaviour in Schools Study: How does school discipline affect pupil mental health and wellbeing?](https://arc-w.nihr.ac.uk/research/projects/how-does-school-discipline-affect-pupil-mental-health-and-wellbeing) arc-w.nihr.ac.uk/research/projects/how-does-school-discipline-affect-pupil-mental-health-and-wellbeing

Give warnings for triggering content

There will of course be times when a conversation comes up which is distressing for the young person. But where this can be prepared for, or a choice given to avoid it, this is really helpful.



"Issues came up in PSHE, English and Criminology. My good teachers sent me the powerpoint the day before and it helped me choose whether to be there or not." - *Young Person*



"our school ran a series of assemblies about sexual harassment and abuse but they didn't warn our daughter. It seemed so unnecessary for her to have to have another panic attack in school when it could have been so easily avoided."

- *Parent*



"Teachers always say 'you can walk out of the class if you need to', but walking out feels hard because everyone's looking at you and knows that you're triggered. So it's much better to have a bit of warning and the choice not to attend – much better than trying to leave once a class has started".

- *Young Person*



Build confidence in learning

It can be challenging for children's confidence if their capacity to concentrate or attend school decreases. Scaffolding work or reducing timetables can be steps to build it back.



"My child struggled to attend school at times due to fatigue and overwhelm. She was ambitious about her studies though, so school sharing class material helped her feel she could keep up and not lose heart. This was especially good when shared in advance" - Parent



"A reduced timetable helped our child focus on her key subjects. She had so much fatigue that removing 'noise' from other subjects meant she could focus energy on core subjects and the ones she most enjoyed" - Parent

Plan, do, review

The journey after trauma is not a straight line. Things can get easier and then harder again. Arrange a regular review of how things are going, involving the family where you can.



"Remember it's a long journey. Don't expect us to have 'got over it' in a few weeks or months. It helps to be checked in with, even if we're doing ok." - Young Person



"Try to acknowledge and celebrate the small wins – these are important and help build confidence." - Parent

7

Additional pages & Areas for consideration

Peer relationships

Peer support can help, especially for older young people. Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone closer to your own age. But others knowing can have negative ramifications too. Schools can help navigate peer support.

Help young people decide what and whether they would like to tell friends. How might their friends react? Reassure them that it is their decision and they might want to take time to decide as they cannot 'untell'. Help them plan what they want to say if someone asks about time out for appointments, or asks them what happened. A 'script' is useful.

More on these and more in the CSA Education Guidance: csapathway.uk/education.pdf

Sometimes abuse is known about in the peer group, and this can lead to bullying



"Peers knew from social media and people started making horrible comments. It really helped to have space to think with her tutor, her and me about what information to share so it wasn't getting lost in rumours. The emphasis was on clarity, honesty and facts.

This helped for a while. In retrospect, it might have worked better to re-group when things got bad again and re-visit what had already been spoken about and what was coming up." - Parent



"Friendships are so important. After telling my friends that something happened it felt like I could move easier around them. They didn't exclude me from talking about certain topics, but they gave me a little warning when themes came up in a book or a film." - Young Person

Child-on-child harm

52% of sexual harm is caused by other children*. When there is an allegation against another student schools have a duty to safeguard both children. Guidance on safety planning and concerns about harmful sexual behaviour in education available below.



Safety planning in education



“Being in the same class with the person who had harmed me was really hard. The school were aware but because of sets they didn’t move us – even after the police had told them to. I took time out and managed to pass, but I think others would have stopped coming to school. That’s not fair” - *Young Person*



“It felt like I was being punished for it happening to me.” - *Young Person*

Check who is having to make adjustments – whose routine changes? The victim’s stability should be prioritised. (*Keeping Children Safe in Education 2023:126*)

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

New guidance on this coming soon from [Be Safe Bristol](#) in collaboration with [Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership](#)



HSB resources and guidance

* National Analysis of Police-recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Crimes [vkpp.org.uk/vkpp-work/analytical-capability/national-analysis-of-police-recorded-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-crimes-report-2022/](https://www.vkpp.org.uk/vkpp-work/analytical-capability/national-analysis-of-police-recorded-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-crimes-report-2022/)



Thank you for taking time to read this. We hope it will be one part of moving towards a future where all young people feel supported and engaged in their learning and relationships. Many of these principles are useful for supporting all kinds of trauma impacts, not only sexual trauma.

Thank you to all the young people, parents and educational professionals who have contributed to the creation of this guidance.



the-green-house.org.uk | Registered Charity Number 800806

Have you experienced childhood sexual abuse? Would you like someone to talk to? The Southwest Survivor Pathway can help you find support. Go to survivorpathway.org.uk