

## **Sexual risk: Managing risk and COVID-19 restrictions**



The COVID-19 restrictions which have been put in place by the Government stipulate that everyone should always remain at home except for essential food shopping, medical need, commuting to/from work where it is not possible to work from home and limited exercise. Some families may experience increased anxiety in response to the current crisis, particularly as families receive continuous news updates about people's ill health and the number of deaths recorded. Childline have useful information and advice for children on their website:

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/worries-about-the-world/coronavirus/>

As a consequence of the COVID-19 restrictions, families are having to spend much more time at home together and as such the risk of harm to some vulnerable children and adults is likely to increase. This could include children and vulnerable adults being at risk of sexual abuse, including harmful sexual behaviour between children and young people.

### **Why risk may increase?**

Children will be spending more time at home, potentially with adults or older

siblings who may pose a risk of sexual harm. They will also be having much less contact with people outside of their household due to the restrictions around social distancing and so they are likely to experience increased barriers in seeking help.

Many parents are currently under pressure to continue working from home while also caring for their children so it will not always be easy to maintain effective supervision.

Older siblings may be being asked to care for younger siblings while their parents work, either away from the home or at home but in a different room. Furthermore, in some families it is possible adults who have had allegations of sexual abuse made against them may be providing childcare while protective parents work. Such situations may increase children's vulnerability to sexual abuse.

### **Safety Planning:**

In families, where sexual risk has been identified as a concern it will be important to review the existing safety plan in place with them. This could be done by phone call, video call or for those at most risk in person, while following the government's

most current social distancing and hygiene advice.

Any safety plan will need to be specific to each family; however, the key aim will be to work with parents to help them identify the key risks, including hot spot areas of the home and hot spot times of the day in which child sexual abuse, including harmful sexual behaviour between children could occur. This could include times when supervision is reduced, such as when a parent is working, leaving the family home for food shopping or medical needs. In developing or reviewing a safety plan, it will therefore be important to consider what safety measures can be put in place to negate the risks caused by the physical absence of a protective parent.

### **Keeping children who have experienced sexual abuse safe:**

Research has found that teachers and teaching assistants are the professionals whom children are most likely to make disclosures of sexual abuse. This is likely to be due to teachers and teaching assistants being the professionals with whom children have the most contact and feel able to trust.

There are many barriers which can prevent children from disclosing child sexual abuse. These can include them having been threatened by the abuser; fear of the consequences, e.g. getting into

trouble, being taken away, not wanting the abuser to get into trouble; fear they will not be believed; lack of understanding; communication or learning difficulties etc.

Given the current COVID-19 restrictions, children may feel even less able to seek support, especially if they are not having contact with anyone, outside of the family home.

To ensure children feel more able to share worries, consider the following:

- Speak to protective parents about ensuring they have regular check-ins with their children to see how they are coping and if they have any concerns. Open communication in families helps to protect children from abuse as they are encouraged to talk about worries.
- Maintain telephone/Skype contact with at risk children so they have access to someone outside the household. Remind the child who they can contact if they feel worried and how?
- Get the safe family network on board – encourage protective family members from other households to contact those children at risk by telephone, Skype or messenger to check-in with children.

- Create or review a family safety plan with the parents and children, including the reasons for this and how the children can access their support network. This could be done by telephone call or Skype.

Restrictions on social contact and mobility doesn't mean those at risk shouldn't seek to protect themselves or others.

Considering how to do this and where to go will be made more difficult given the current situation but exploring options is still important, even if this means seeking direct help from someone outside of their household.

### **Young people and children who display harmful sexual behaviour:**

The school environment and organised clubs and activities help children and young people to meet different needs through healthy means and can provide them with a safe place. The current COVID-19 restrictions may increase risk for children particularly in homes where there are concerns around neglect and domestic abuse. Harmful sexual behaviour can sometimes occur in response to unmet needs or trauma.

Parents/carers could use the school closures to their advantage by engaging their children in a range of activities at home to develop bonds and they could educate their children about consent and

safe touch. The NSPCC's PANTS rule provides simple and clear messages, which will be easy for parents to talk through with their children, especially younger children. SWIFT can also provide resources which parents/carers can use to teach their children about keeping safe.

Please email

[SWIFT.Referrals@eastsussex.gov.uk](mailto:SWIFT.Referrals@eastsussex.gov.uk) to

request resources.

### **Responding to incidents of harmful sexual behaviour: Four Step Approach**

The four-step approach is a simple strategy which can be used by parents/carers as a way of appropriately responding to incidents of harmful/problematic sexual behaviour that occur. It would be useful to revisit these steps with parents/carers at the current time due to stress levels being heightened and the risk of parents/carers responding in an over emotional manner. The four steps are as follows:

#### **1) Stop the behaviour**

Do not address the behaviour while the child is still doing it. Separate the children and tell them to stop what they are doing.

#### **2) Define the behaviour**

Be clear what behaviour the child is doing that is inappropriate. Describe what you see to the child so they have a clear understanding of what they need to change.

E.g. *“You are touching Billy’s private parts and that’s not okay”.*

### **3) State the rules**

Tell the child how you expect them to behave. *“The rule is...”* or

*“We expect everyone to respect each other’s privacy and that includes not touching each other on the genitals...”.*

### **4) Enforce the consequence or redirect the child**

For younger children you can redirect or distract the child to more appropriate behaviour. End the encounter on a positive note and praise the child when he acts in the way you suggest. If the child is older and this behaviour is repetitive, you may wish to enforce a consequence.

*Re-visit self-management strategies with individuals (both adults and young people) who have had allegations made against them – distraction techniques, self-talk strategies, removing self from situation, where and who they can access support.*

### **Internet safety**

Due to the restrictions in place preventing people from leaving their homes to socialise, it is likely that many children and young people will have increased access to screen time as a means of enjoyment, alleviating boredom and keeping in touch with friends and family. However, if unmonitored, children and young people may be vulnerable to potential risks online.

This could include access to inappropriate material, such as online pornography and/or being groomed by others.

### **Offer parents advice on internet safety**

- Set up parental controls (contact internet provider for guidance)
- Draw up a family agreement about responsible internet use (visit [www.childnet.com](http://www.childnet.com) for an example family agreement).
- Talk to children about apps and websites they use.
- Check mobile telephones/tablets, other technology.
- Restrict use of mobile telephone at night-time.

### **Key agencies for support:**

- **Police** – by calling 999
- **SPOA** - East Sussex Children Services Single Point of Advice 01323 464222
- **Stop It Now** – contact 0808 1000 900 or visit <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk> for confidential support when someone is worried about their or someone else’s sexual thoughts/behaviour
- [www.parentsprotect.co.uk](http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk) – information on how to protect children from child sexual abuse
- [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk) – information on warning signs and how to talk to children about sexual abuse.