

7 Minute Briefing – Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) within the Family Environment

Intra-familial CSA refers to CSA that occurs within a family environment. The perpetrators may or may not be related to the child – the key factor is that they feel like the family from the child’s point of view; it is rarely an isolated occurrence and may occur for many years. CSA within the family environment includes abuse by a relative (such as a parent, stepparent, sibling or extended family member) and abuse by someone close to the child in other ways (such as a foster carer, pre-adoptive or adoptive parent, a close family friend or a babysitter). Around 1/3 of CSA is committed by other children and young people (Hackett, 2014). Peer sexual abuse can happen in a range of settings e.g. school, home, public places, parties, friend’s houses and online.

1. What is CSA Within The Family?

2. Barriers to Disclosures

7. Resources to Support Practice

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse>

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/practice-resources/>

6. How to Respond to Disclosures

The initial response to disclosure should be to listen carefully to what the child says/ to observe their behaviour. Practitioners must clarify the concerns; offer reassurance about how the child will be kept safe and explain what action will be taken and within what timeframe, in a way suitable for the child’s age and stage of development. The most important consideration is the safety and well-being of the child and other children that may be at risk. Once a practitioner is aware of concerns, a referral to Children’s Social Care must be made immediately. Children’s Social Care refer reports of sexual abuse to the Police.

There are cases where it will not be appropriate to discuss concerns with parents/ carers before referral. In such situations, the timing of contact with parents/ carers will be agreed with Children’s Social Care and/ or the Police once the referral has been made.

5. Other Signs of CSA

- Frightened when with someone they know
- Language or sexual behaviour you wouldn’t expect them to know
- Nightmares or bedwetting
- Sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy
- Becoming withdrawn, emotionally flat, disinterested and isolated
- Becoming hyperactive or aggressive
- School problems; poor attendance and/ or poor school work
- Alcohol or drug use, self-harm
- Bleeding, discharge, pain around genital area

CSA within the Family Environment

Abuse can remain undisclosed as children may fear their abuser or not want to get them in trouble. Intra-familial CSA occurs across all families however some barriers to disclosures may include higher levels of shame and stigma in Black, Asian and Minority groups, combined with cultural assumptions by professionals.

Some young people will have additional challenges in disclosing due to communication, religious, language, cultural, gender or sexuality issues. Research indicates disabled children are three times more likely to be victims of CSA. Care experienced children may have additional challenges to disclosure of abuse by foster carers, care workers or kinship carers due to their history of abuse or neglect. Practitioners cannot rely on/ wait for disclosure; they need to respond to signs, indicators and risk factors.

3. Verbal and Non-Verbal Disclosures

CSA that takes place within family environment often remains hidden and is the most secretive and difficult type of abuse for children to disclose. Rates of verbal disclosure are low at the time that abuse occurs in childhood. Children may disclose sexual abuse verbally, either directly or indirectly (for example, talking about ‘secrets’).

4. Non-Verbal Disclosures

Children say they are trying to disclose their abuse when they show signs or act in ways that they hope adults will notice i.e. changes in their behaviour, letter writing, drawing pictures or playing with dolls. Practitioners should explore behavioural signs that give them cause for concern; behaviour that indicates emotional distress, changes in usual behaviour and sexualised behaviour, as well as physical signs of abuse. Potential signs of sexual abuse may ‘hide’ behind other factors, such as neglect. Sometimes, the first sign that a child has been sexually abused is when they begin to exhibit harmful sexual behaviour towards others. This may be towards other children in the family, classmates or other children. Care experienced children may present their distress in different ways to other children. There could be an increase in dysregulation in some children and it should not be assumed this is due to past trauma alone. Disabled children may be more likely than others to exhibit behaviours as signs; it is important that these are not simply attributed to the child’s disability.