

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: sexual abuse

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC helpline contacts to highlight the impact of child sexual abuse on children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic.

August 2020

Key Findings

Childline counselling sessions

- There's been a threefold increase in the number of Childline counselling sessions about child sexual abuse within the family, from an average of 8 sessions per week before the pandemic restrictions were imposed to an average of 23 per week since 23 March 2020.
- Some children told Childline that sexual abuse had become more frequent during lockdown, as they were spending more time with their abuser.
- Over a quarter of Childline counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family relate to abuse that has happened recently. A fifth of Childline counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family relate to abuse that has been going on for at least a year.
- Spending more time alone and without the usual distractions meant that distressing memories of past abuse began to surface for some young people.
- One third of Childline counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family relate to abuse that happened more than a year ago. For some young people, this is the first time they have told anyone.

- Lockdown has added an extra challenge for those young people considering disclosing sexual abuse. They have had less opportunity to speak to trusted adults outside the home, such as teachers.
- It has been more challenging for young people to cope with the impact of abuse during the pandemic as their normal support mechanisms are less likely to be in place. For some children and young people, Childline has been the only source of support where they can talk about their experiences.

NSPCC helpline contacts

- There has been a decrease in the number of contacts to the NSPCC helpline from adults with concerns about child sexual abuse, from an average of 138 per week before the pandemic restrictions were imposed to an average of 104 per week since 23 March 2020.
- Adults contacting the NSPCC helpline since lockdown began are more likely to be worried about sexual abuse that is happening in the child's own home. This was a concern in 53% of contacts about sexual abuse before the pandemic restrictions were imposed, compared to 77% since 23 March 2020.
- For some adults, the stay-at-home rules were the catalyst for them to speak out about their concerns that a child was being sexually abused by a family member.

About this briefing

This briefing contains quotes from children and young people which may cause distress. Further support is available from the NSPCC helpline and Childline (contact details are listed at the end of the briefing).

Child sexual abuse is when a child is forced or persuaded into taking part in sexual activities. This may involve physical contact or non-contact activities, and can take place online or offline. Perpetrators may also groom children online in order to make contact with them and carry out offline sexual abuse. Adults or children can carry out sexual abuse, individually or as a group. Children and young people may not always understand that they are being sexually abused, especially if they have been groomed and/or manipulated by their abuser.

It is never a child's fault that they have been sexually abused and they should never be blamed for what has happened to them.

¹ For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government issued its stay at home guidance (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 31 May). See the methodology section for more details.

This briefing focuses on children, young people and adults talking to Childline and the NSPCC helpline about sexual abuse within the family. This includes abuse by an adult parent, carer or relative; the partner of a family member; a sibling; or a cousin. During the pandemic restrictions, most children and young people were only allowed to spend time with members of their household.

Child sexual abuse – like all types of abuse - can be difficult to recognise and hard to talk about. This briefing does highlight some increases in the number of adults and children talking to us about specific issues, but the statistics in this briefing should not be read as an indicator of prevalence. It is clear that the pandemic restrictions have given some people an additional reason to speak out about concerns they already had.

- [Find out more about child sexual abuse on NSPCC Learning](#)
- [Read our statistics briefing on child sexual abuse](#)

We will be publishing a separate insight briefing in the autumn that looks more broadly at online abuse.

Recognising child sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is usually hidden from view. Adults in the child's life may not recognise the signs that they are being abused, and the child may not understand what's happening to them is abuse or may be too afraid to speak out. To help keep children safe and get them any support they need, it's important that adults know the signs of sexual abuse and share concerns they may have about a child's welfare.

Some adults who contacted us with concerns about sexual abuse within the family had noticed something wasn't quite right with a child during a socially distanced visit. Others had seen or heard something during a video call which worried them.

Some adults got in touch with our helpline because they didn't think a child's parents or carers had recognised the signs of sexual abuse. They put this down to parents and carers being distracted and overburdened with the increasing stresses of life during lockdown.

Others had been concerned about a child experiencing sexual abuse for a while. They hadn't felt able to contact our helpline before, but now they were worried that the child was spending more time at home with someone who posed a risk. This increased the urgency for them to get in touch.

“I’ve long suspected my grandson was being abused by his step-father, but every time I’ve tried to raise this with my daughter she chastises me and claims I’m lying - she’s even threatened to ban me from seeing my grandchild...I’m worried things are only going to get worse now we’re in lockdown”

Grandmother, NSPCC helpline

When people contact the NSPCC helpline with concerns about a child, our helpline professionals use the information they are given to assess the potential risk to the child. If we feel a child is at risk of abuse and we have enough information to do so, we will make a referral to other services such as children’s social care or the police.

Impact of sexual abuse on children

Experiencing sexual abuse can have a long-lasting negative impact on a child’s wellbeing that can reach into adulthood. Effects can include mental health issues (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression), challenging behaviour (such as substance misuse, sexualised behaviour, offending), relationship problems (for example intimacy issues, having unstable relationships) and can include being vulnerable to further sexual abuse or other types of abuse. However, with the right support, children can recover after experiencing sexual abuse.

Children and young people talk to Childline about the impact of experiencing sexual abuse. They may feel overwhelmed by a range of different emotions.

Feelings young people mention in counselling sessions about sexual abuse include anger (with themselves as well as the perpetrator); confusion; fear; guilt; helplessness; shame; and worry. Young people also talk about feeling betrayed and violated by people they know and love.

During lockdown, one third of counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family were about abuse that had happened more than a year ago. Some young people discuss the long-term effects of the abuse:

“Is it ok for me to talk about some things that happened in the past as it’s been really eating at me lately and I would like to get it off my chest? When I was 7 my mum and dad divorced and I didn’t see very much of my dad. I didn’t know why, but I do remember feeling scared of him. After some time, I started seeing my dad and things were ok at first but then he started doing things that were wrong, sexually wrong. I started self-harming, got diagnosed with depression and anxiety and was suicidal...I have now been diagnosed with PTSD and feel the worst I

have ever felt. I have been trying to process it and come to terms with what happened but I get really bad flashbacks and have frequent panic and anxiety attacks. I just can't cope with it anymore"

Girl, age unknown, Childline

Key Themes

Abuse getting worse during lockdown

Some young people told Childline that someone in their family had started to sexually abuse them during lockdown.

"It started during lockdown, about 7 weeks ago. Dad touched me and got me to touch him. Today he came into my room and removed his trousers and asked me to do something to him and I did it. I feel it is my fault because I should have said no. I live with dad and mum and my younger brother. I don't get on with mum, we argue all the time and don't really communicate. Dad shouts all the time and I think he has mental health issues. I don't want to live here anymore. I feel I should tell social services about how abusive dad is, but I don't feel ready to tell them about the sexual abuse part"

Girl, aged 17, Childline

Others said they had been experiencing sexual abuse since before lockdown began. They said things had got worse now that they were spending longer periods of time at home with their abuser. Some mentioned the perpetrator having more free time because they were furloughed or had lost their job. Others told us they were being abused by a sibling. One girl told us she was being sexually abused by her step-brother:

"I am too embarrassed to tell anyone as I should have said something earlier but it didn't happen so much before. Over the last few weeks things have got far worse and last night he did something to really hurt me"

Girl, age unknown, Childline

Relatives providing childcare

In Childline counselling sessions, some children and young people talked about being sexually abused by a relative their parents had asked to help with childcare. With

parents out of the house for longer periods of time, perpetrators had more opportunity to carry out abuse.

One girl told Childline that a male family member had moved in to look after her while her mum worked nights at a hospital. The previous night he had touched her inappropriately for the first time.

“He tried to do things that he shouldn’t and climbed on top of me and put his hands under my clothes”

Girl, aged 12, Childline

Sexual abuse by a family member

Since the stay-at-home guidance was issued, the number of Childline counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family has increased from an average of 8 counselling sessions per week to 23 counselling sessions per week. Girls accounted for almost all the increase, rising from an average of 4 counselling sessions per week to 17 per week.

Children who are experiencing sexual abuse within the family may worry about how their non-abusive parents or carers will feel if they speak out about what is happening.

“My uncle is touching me sexually. He did it today and it has been happening for a few months now. He is still visiting us and sleeps over despite the government lockdown and I don’t feel safe at home. Nobody else knows and I don’t know if I could tell my parents, it would destroy my dad”

Boy aged 15, Childline

The NSPCC helpline heard from parents with shared custody arrangements, who were worried about abuse going on in the other parent’s home. One father told us that he didn’t want to breach his custody agreement, but also wanted to keep his child safe:

“My ex’s partner has been making inappropriate comments towards my 13-year-old daughter, saying how pretty she is and that he’d like her to wear revealing clothing. I’ve got shared custody of the kids, but I’m really not comfortable sending them back to a place I know isn’t safe”

Father, NSPCC helpline

In other cases, contact visits with separated parents had stopped during lockdown. Family members were worried that the child would be at risk of sexual abuse when visits resumed:

“I am ringing with concerns for my 6-year-old grandson who I suspect is being sexually abused by his father. My grandson is not seeing his father due to coronavirus but supervised contact is due to start up after the pandemic. I need advice on how I can stop my grandson from having to see his father”

Grandmother, NSPCC helpline

Previous experience of child sexual abuse

While some children told us about abuse that was ongoing, others needed to talk about abuse that had happened previously. For some the abuse had happened recently, but for others it had happened more than a year ago.

Being in lockdown created an environment where young people were spending more time alone, with fewer distractions and more time to think. For some, this meant that painful and repressed memories started to emerge. This included flashbacks of past sexual abuse. Young people talked about these memories making them feel “trapped”. The pandemic conditions seem to have escalated their feelings of helplessness and panic.

Children and young people who spoke about non-recent child sexual abuse often mentioned having sleeping problems, bad dreams featuring the perpetrator and being scared at night.

“I was sexually abused by my uncle when I was younger. Since lockdown I have started to have bad dreams again. I have told mum what happened and feel relieved that I told her...Mum is trying to get me some support but everywhere is closed just now”

Girl aged 14, Childline

Some young people talked to Childline because they had remembered something that had happened in the past, which they didn't fully understand at the time. They wanted help to process their memories.

“Something has been on my mind for quite some time, but since being in quarantine it has got to me a lot more. I have been having flashbacks of when I was younger and what happened to me is quite confusing. An adult family member who was staying with us took me out of my room and undressed me, saying that I would find it more comfortable to sleep without clothes on. The thing is, I know something bad happened and I know I didn't like it. I remember being held down with force and him covering my mouth. I have never told anyone about it for fear of being judged and I didn't really understand what happened at the time and

was too scared to say it out loud. The experience has really scarred me and I know it has changed who I am"

Boy aged 17, Childline

Speaking out during coronavirus

Young people are often nervous speaking about the sexual abuse they are experiencing and need a lot of reassurance that what they say will remain private. Childline is a confidential service and only shares a child's information with other services in exceptional circumstances, for example if a child is in a life-threatening situation, or if they are requesting direct help. Our counsellors always seek consent from a young person before anything is shared.

Coronavirus has been a significant factor for young people considering whether to speak out about the sexual abuse they have experienced.

Some young people who talked to Childline said they felt unsafe at home. They felt their options were very limited during lockdown, because they had nowhere to go if they talked to a parent or carer about the abuse and didn't get a supportive response:

"My dad touched me sexually when I was younger and now I have to be home all the time with him and I can't deal with it. Just being in the house with him is so hard. I am constantly reminded of what he did. I stay in my room and don't talk to anyone. My mum doesn't know and I don't know how to tell her. I am so scared that she will tell him what I have said and believe him and not me. Every time I think about trying to say the words I just break down...I have thought about writing her a letter but what if she hates me after reading it? If I tell her whilst we are in quarantine there will be no way to escape. I just feel so trapped"

Girl aged 15, Childline

Some children weren't sure who they could talk to about the abuse they were experiencing, as they weren't going to school. They felt that Childline was their only source of support:

"Hi Childline, I am very nervous to share something with you that is very personal and scary for me. I don't know what to do in this situation and I am worried that if it continues then it could get worse and more bad things may happen. I am being made to do sexual things by someone in my family and I am too scared to say who it is. I don't want it to continue but I don't know how to escape from it. I feel you are my only support at the moment, because I am not at school and feel anxious at the thought of speaking to my family or my GP"

Girl aged 15, Childline

Other children were worried about the risk of their family being infected with coronavirus if they reported the abuse:

“My dad has been sexually abusing me nearly all my life. It wasn’t so bad before because it didn’t happen so much. I would ignore it and just go to school and enjoy things like seeing my friends. But in lockdown dad is doing it 5 or 6 times a day and it is really hurting. He told me I am getting too old so I am hoping that means it will stop. I do want help making it stop but I am so worried that someone would come to the house and bring in coronavirus and we will all die – it isn’t worth the risk. I might try and get some help when the coronavirus is over”

Girl aged 11, Childline

Finding support

Some of the children and young people who contacted Childline about sexual abuse said that it was harder to cope during lockdown. They were finding it particularly difficult to manage their feelings without everyday life to distract them. Some children talked about their usual support mechanisms, such as school or counselling, not being available during the pandemic. Others said the support they received had changed, as they were now meeting their social worker or mental health professional online or over the phone. This wasn’t always easy to adapt to. Some children said they were on a waiting list for professional support, but weren’t expecting to get an appointment until the end of the pandemic.

“I’m not really sure how to contain my emotions in quarantine anymore. I feel so trapped in my home with my family. I can’t sleep well because I hate the night time. I just want to hit things and feel physical pain. I miss my school and my friends and I just need to get out. I feel like I am getting into a really bad place, but without everything I usually have to keep me busy, it’s really hard”

Girl aged 17, Childline

Some children had tried to speak to a parent or carer about the abuse they had experienced, but their parents had not been supportive. This made the young person feel as if they shouldn’t talk about what had happened to them. One girl told us that her 15-year-old step-brother had sexually abused her when she was 9. She had told her mum about it but her mum’s response was that “it could have been worse.” The girl felt that her mother didn’t care:

“I really wanted mum to say what he did wasn’t ok and it was not my fault”

Girl, age unknown, Childline

Some young people told us how talking to Childline had helped them. Some also mentioned how using tools on Childline's website, such as the mood journal, had helped them express their feelings.

"We had a male family member staying with us due to lockdown. The other night he got really drunk and started saying inappropriate things to me. He started to hug me and touched me down below. I shoved him off and told my parents who dealt with it and he has gone now, but I feel overwhelmed and sick to the stomach. I don't think I will ever be the same but I feel much better now I have got it off my chest and just want to thank Childline for listening to me. It really means a lot especially in the conditions we are in at the moment"

Girl aged 15, Childline

Conclusion

This briefing highlights that the restrictions created by the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the risk for some children who were experiencing sexual abuse within their family home. Lockdown provided some perpetrators with more opportunities to sexually abuse children in their family.

Being in lockdown also made it harder for children to speak out to trusted adults, ask for help and get the support they needed. Childline became a vital channel for some children to talk about what was happening to them.

But in some cases, the stay-at-home rules increased the urgency for adults to contact the NSPCC helpline and report their concerns.

For some children, the pandemic conditions created an environment where repressed memories of non-recent abuse began to emerge. Some talked about struggling to cope with the long-term impact of the abuse they had experienced.

Evidence shows that, with the right support at the right time, children can recover after experiencing sexual abuse. The NSPCC is calling on governments to deal with the "hidden harms" of the pandemic and ensure support for children who have experienced sexual abuse is embedded in recovery planning. In England this must include the publication and implementation of a comprehensive, cross-government strategy for tackling child sexual abuse.

Across the UK, strategies need to focus on effective prevention measures and ensure that children and young people who have experienced abuse are able to access timely, specialist support that meets their needs – including through Child House

initiatives where health, policing, social work, therapeutic and other services provide support to children and young people under one roof.

Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact the NSPCC helpline and Childline, the counsellors record what they tell us.

The insight in this briefing is taken from those helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions where the counsellors recorded information about child sexual abuse in the family.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC and Childline. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

The time periods

The first time an adult mentioned coronavirus when contacting the NSPCC helpline was 6 January 2020. The first time a child mentioned coronavirus when contacting Childline was 10 January 2020.

For the purpose of this briefing, we have compared the period before the government introduced its stay-at-home rules (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (23 March – 31 May). We have used weekly averages to compare between the 2 time periods.

Data tables

Childline and the NSPCC helpline offer support to children, young people and adults across the UK. People contacting either service can choose to remain anonymous, so we do not always know which part of the UK children live in. Whilst we are able to provide some top-level geographical breakdowns in some contexts, the numbers in this briefing are too small to provide further breakdowns.

Childline counselling sessions about contact sexual abuse²

	Before lockdown	Since lockdown
Counselling sessions about contact sexual abuse (weekly average)	134	135
Counselling session about contact sexual abuse as a proportion of all Childline counselling sessions	3%	3%
Counselling sessions about child sexual abuse within the family (weekly average)	8	23

² These numbers do not include counselling sessions about online abuse, which are recorded separately.

Childline counselling sessions about sexual abuse within the family broken down by gender:

Gender	Average number of counselling sessions per week	
	Before lockdown	Since lockdown
Girls	4	17
Boys	3	3
Transgender	-	-
Prefer not to say	1	3

Childline counsellors record when sexual abuse in the family happened, if the young person tells us. The timeline of abuse was disclosed in around 80% of these counselling sessions.

When abuse happened (if known)	Proportion of contacts about sexual abuse within the family
Recent	28%
Within the last year	17%
More than a year and ongoing	20%
Happened more than a year ago	35%

NSPCC helpline contacts about contact sexual abuse³

	Before lockdown	Since lockdown
Contacts about contact sexual abuse (weekly average)	138	104
Contacts about contact sexual abuse as a proportion of all helpline contacts	11%	7%

³ These contacts do not include concerns about online abuse, which are recorded separately.

Our helpline professionals record the location at which the person contacting us thinks that the child is at risk of contact sexual abuse:

Location	Percentage of contacts about sexual abuse	
	Before lockdown	Since lockdown
Family home	53%	77%
Someone else's home	4%	10%
Other	43%	13%

+ Further support and information



Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.



Contact our helpline if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child
nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection during coronavirus

