



napac

The National Association for
People Abused in Childhood

Child on child abuse

Supporting recovery from childhood abuse

Child on child abuse

How can one child abuse another child?

NAPAC exists to support survivors of any type of abuse or neglect in childhood, be it sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.

Abuse can happen in any relationship where there is a power imbalance. Adults have power over children because they are bigger and stronger, but these power imbalances can also occur in a child's relationship with his or her peers.

Some children may develop faster than others, creating a power imbalance due to physical size or cognitive ability. Other children may have power over a peer due to a wealthier family background relative to a peer from less affluent circumstances. Sometimes a smaller or younger child can dominate an older child.





NAPAC hears from people who have suffered abuse in many different contexts and types of relationship, including child-on-child abuse.

Although the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse are often reported across the media, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect can also have a very long-lasting impact.

At NAPAC we see all of this as part of the same problem of the abuse of power in relationships. And whilst not widely publicised, it is often the emotional impact of any type of abuse that has long-term consequences.

Emotional abuse in child-to-child relationships can include bullying, shaming, isolating, and excluding, to list just a few examples. But we do generally hear from more people suffering the consequences of sexual abuse than other types of abuse, irrespective of age or relationship to the perpetrator.



What is sexual abuse between children?

Sexual abuse is often inflicted by perpetrators who also use other forms of abusive cruelty, as described in the testimonies shared through the *Everyone's Invited* movement. Often there is subsequent sharing of details of the abuse and 'slut shaming'.

Most sexual violence is perpetrated by someone known to the victim, and that is no different when the perpetrator is a child. This often means the perpetrator is a sibling, but it could also mean a neighbour, cousin or a young person in a sports or youth group setting. We also hear of child-on-child abuse in schools, religious groups, gangs, and in youth justice correctional settings or local authority care.

Impacts on the child's development

From the point of view of the child, if it felt like abuse then it was abuse. This is not to say that everything that felt like abuse was done abusively or with malice, as children can have strong emotional reactions to well-meaning and appropriate boundary setting. The emotional impact is more important than the intent when the actions cause feelings of harm.

When abuse persists over time the child's emotional and cognitive development may become impacted, but one isolated incident of sexual abuse can also have a serious and long-lasting impact. All abuse is serious, but it is always possible to work through to a resolution as an adult with the appropriate type and level of support.



How can parents get it wrong in responding to disclosures?

At NAPAC we have heard from many people who suffered sexual abuse perpetrated by another child within the family. These survivors often tell us that they have only recently been able to talk about it and see with an adult perspective that it was wrong, although some did also disclose to a parent or carer at the time of the abuse.

Family dynamics can be very complicated in these circumstances and all too often we hear that the abused child was not taken seriously. This type of dismissive response can also happen when the disclosure comes years later in adulthood.

It seems that in many cases the responsible adult carers find it easier to minimise the seriousness of the problem. This can take the form of believing the abusing child's denial or simply saying that nothing serious happened. The person who suffered abuse can feel revictimised by the disbelief, even if the denying response comes many years later in adulthood.

If the problem is not fully discussed in an open and honest way, then family gatherings can become difficult for the survivor and relationships can suffer. The person who experienced the abuse may feel pressured or required to pretend nothing happened or just to 'get over it' so that the family can present itself to others as being happy and well-functioning.



Truthful and responsible participation in exploring family problems can enable resolution and healing.

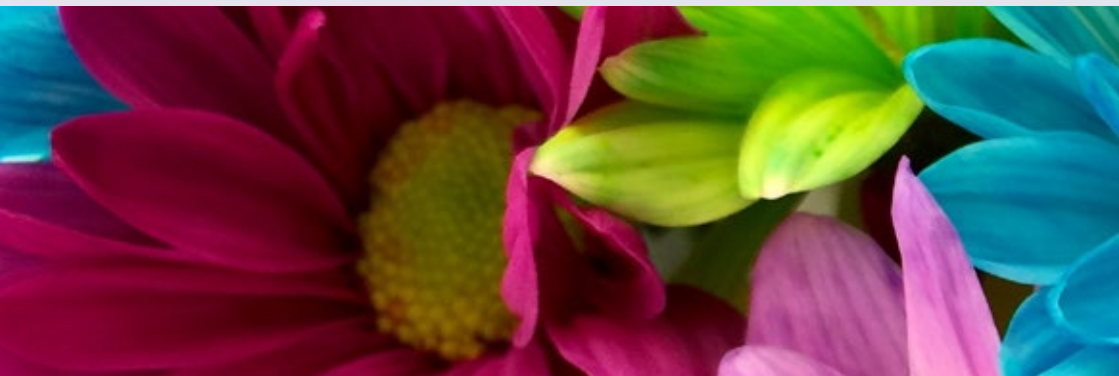
What can survivors do if they are not believed?

This leaves the survivor in a difficult position, with tough choices to make. Many people in this position try for years to have their family acknowledge what happened, but it is often impossible to change someone's mind if they do not want to change.

In the end the best route to recovery may be by reducing contact or cutting ties with the dysfunctional family members who remain in denial. We believe that truthful and responsible participation in exploring family problems can enable resolution and healing.

We also see a similar pattern of response to disclosures of abuse in schools, where senior managers decide to move the victim of bullying to a new class, rather than attempt to alter the behaviour of a perpetrator. This response is also alarmingly prevalent in schools when cases of inappropriate sexual behaviour and sexual violence are disclosed, as evidenced by the testimonies shared through the *Everyone's Invited* movement. For school leadership teams it is often easier to move the victim, but this only validates the perpetrator, giving them more power, and encouraging more inappropriate behaviour by peers.

Survivors of child abuse often hope that one day the perpetrator will take responsibility and admit that they behaved badly, but we know this rarely happens. Even in the case of incredibly serious crimes such as sexual violence many survivors are denied or unable to obtain justice for a variety of complex reasons. In child-on-child abuse the perpetrator is likely to have been confused about what they were doing and the inappropriate nature of their behaviour, so finding resolution years later can be difficult.



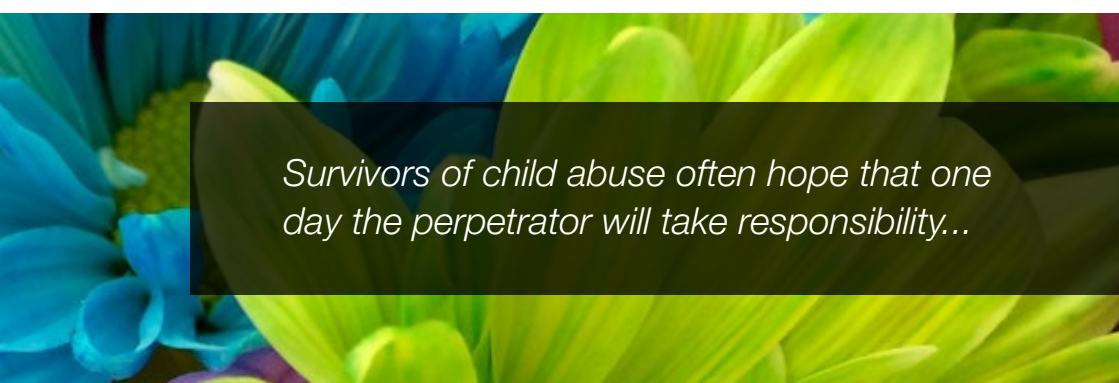
Finding the way to healing and recovery

The first step to finding the right support to achieve healing and recovery is by talking it all through with a trusted person. This can be a medical professional, social worker, therapist, or simply someone who is compassionate. The NAPAC support line is available for these conversations and our staff are fully trained to listen and suggest options.

Working through any type of trauma history is hard work. It can take a long time if the childhood circumstances were complicated, which they often are, and may challenge our self-image and beliefs. As adults we learn to be less vulnerable than we were as children, but we must acknowledge our past vulnerabilities to work through traumatic memories towards a resolution.

It is an unfortunate fact of life that children can be cruel. It is also true that we are social beings and children need to feel part of the group. If there is someone to listen and nurture a child who has suffered cruelty, the abuse may not leave a lasting impact, or the severity of the impact may be minimised, so *really* listening to children is important.

NAPAC is here to support all adults who have been affected by abuse in childhood, regardless of gender, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation or age.



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What do the experts say?

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA Centre) published a report on *Sibling sexual abuse* in January 2021¹ which is very helpful in describing how the problem can develop within families. They describe three broad categories of child-on-child sexual activity, suggesting that it is not always abusive. There can be innocent exploration such as ‘doctors and nurses’ play which they describe as within a normal range of behaviours.

Here are the three categories:

1. normative sexual interactions (exploration)
2. inappropriate or problematic sexual behaviour outside developmental norms
3. sexual abuse that causes sexual, physical, and emotional harm (possibly violent).

¹Sibling Sexual Abuse, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/knowledge-in-practice/practice-improvement/sibling-sexual-abuse/>

These categories suggest that there is a universally agreed idea of what is 'normal' which cannot really be consistent across all settings and cultures. The report is aimed at practitioners rather than survivors of non-recent sibling abuse or their parents. People who are struggling with long-term consequences in adulthood clearly did suffer harm at the time, and this report does not invalidate that feeling or experience.

The CSA Centre report also explains that the abusing child may have learned the behaviour from an abusive adult, either in person or from the internet. However well intentioned, this information does not really help the abused child to cope, at the time of the abuse or later in life.



Betrayal trauma

When abuse is perpetrated by an adult with caring responsibilities for the child there is often betrayal trauma. Within families there may be an older sibling who was looked up to or who was given some minor caring responsibilities by the adult(s). If this more powerful sibling becomes abusive the added dimension of betrayal trauma may become part of the emotional impact at the time and over the longer term.

Gangs and organised crime

A difficult reality to face is that sexual violence is often used by powerful individuals as a terror tactic to maintain power and control over others. We see this in some adult relationships, most notably in cases of domestic abuse, but it can also happen amongst children who are caught up in gang violence and organised crime.

This includes the illegal drug distribution networks known as 'county lines', where organised criminals manipulate and coerce young people into transporting and selling illegal drugs from cities to smaller towns. Although this is a far cry from the family life that many of us are accustomed to, we should be aware of the grave dangers faced by some young people.

Recently there have been reports indicating that underage girls are sexually exploited within these gangs and 'passed around' to be sexually violated by other younger gang members as a 'reward' for good sales performances. The hierarchy of criminal organisations, influence of older gang members and connection to illegal drugs can make it very hard for a young person to talk about what has happened to them, especially when they have been isolated from adults and other young people. This may be even more difficult if the young people themselves have committed a crime as part of this exploitation. It is challenging but important to grasp the 'both/and' principle – children can be both offenders and victims in this context.

Gender and sexuality

In general, women and girls suffer more instances of sexual abuse than men and boys. But girls can be perpetrators too, just as boys can be victimised. Assumptions about who is a perpetrator and who is abused can minimise the complexities of the situation, downplaying the harm caused by the abuse and obscuring what really happened.

It is important to know that however others treat us does not change our gender identify or sexuality but can make it harder to feel comfortable with ourselves and others, especially before having access to support for the abusive behaviour we have encountered.

We should not make assumptions based on gender, and looking at what happened in the context of power dynamics can help us see things as they really are and as they were in childhood. Talking with someone empathetic, be that a help or support line operator or trusted friend, can help make sense of why some things have affected us so deeply, and aid us in our recovery.



*Talking with someone compassionate
can help us recover.*



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