

2KNOW

knowledge to prevent

GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

You Are Enough

**A Supportive Guide for Parents and Caregivers
of Children Affected by Sexual Abuse**

With Insights and Advice from Those Who Understand

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About Protect Children

Protect Children is a non-governmental child-rights organisation based in Helsinki, Finland, working globally to end all forms of sexual violence against children.

Learn more about Protect Children: <https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en>

About You Are Enough™

You Are Enough™ groups are online peer support groups designed to help parents and caregivers whose children have experienced sexual violence. These groups offer parents emotional support, practical advice, and a safe space to heal. Learn more about the You Are Enough™ groups and support parents in your country: <https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/sina-riitat>

This guide was originally produced as a part of Project 2KNOW, a two-year project funded by the European Commission, dedicated to improving the ecosystem of prevention and response to online crimes of sexual violence against children.

Letter to Parents from Protect Children

Dear parent or caregiver,

We at Protect Children are extremely sorry about what has happened to your child and your family. Sexual violence against a child is violence against the whole family. Before you start to read this guide, please take a moment, and remember that your child is able to heal with your support. What has happened will not define your child nor you or your family. What happened is not your fault – the shame and guilt belong solely to the offender.

We hope that this guide gives you helpful information but also a feeling of support and hope during this incredibly challenging time. We can only imagine the pain you must be experiencing after learning about what has happened to your child. Please know that you are not alone on this journey.

This guide is based on the information and wisdom we have gathered from brave, resilient, and inspirational parents and caregivers who have attended our You are Enough™ peer support groups over the years and especially those who attended the groups regarding online child sexual abuse in Ireland and Finland as part of our EU-funded Project 2KNOW. Parents might not always feel brave or strong, but we see the strength they have when they support their children every day with whatever strength they have left that day.

Children who have experienced traumatic events need to feel safe and loved to heal. Your everyday parenting, unconditional love, presence, and support as a parent or caregiver will be a source of comfort and healing for your child. **You are enough!**

Remember to take care of yourself as well. It is important to prioritise your own wellbeing and seek support when needed.

Sending you strength and hope as you, your child, and your family continues to heal.

With warmest regards,

The Protect Children team



“When you feel like everything is broken for good and you are mentally beaten lying on the ground thinking that you can't get through this, I want you to know that you will survive. Attend a peer support group, listen and talk as much as you can. Little by little you will get through it.”

A parent who attended the You Are Enough™ peer support group

Before Reading the Guide

Some parents find it helpful to gain understanding and gather as much information as they can about anything related to the crime against their child, while others may find information distressing and prefer to limit their exposure to such reminders of the worst moments of their life. It is important to listen and trust your own feelings to see what is best for you. When reading this guide, please feel free to skip any section that you believe might not be beneficial to you.

Throughout this guide, you will find quotes in purple boxes from parents and caregivers who have participated in our You Are Enough™ peer support groups. Some of these quotes may resonate with your own experiences, while with others you might not connect as strongly. We hope that these quotes still offer encouragement and hope, reminding you that you are not alone in your healing journey.



All quotes used in this evaluation summary are published with the parents' and caregivers' permission. Some have been shortened, slightly reworded (e.g., the gender of the child or other details might have been changed), or combined with other brief quotes for clarity.

Calming Exercises

If you experience any distress while reading this guide, you might find the following exercises helpful for calming your body and mind. These exercises are easy to practise in almost any situation, and your child may benefit from them as well. You can also find some self-care tips at the end of the guide.

Butterfly Tapping: To perform the butterfly hug, cross your thumbs and place them on your sternum with your hands resting on your chest, fingers lightly touching your collarbones. Gently tap your chest alternately with your hands, mimicking the motion of butterfly wings. Continue this for several minutes while taking slow, deep breaths. Adjust the rhythm and pressure of the taps to what feels comfortable and calming for you. Find more information about this exercise [here](#).

Five Senses: Find a quiet, comfortable spot where you can sit, stand, or lie down. Start by taking a few deep breaths, centring your attention on your breathing. Then, shift your focus to your senses: notice five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. This simple sensory awareness helps bring you into the present moment and calm your mind.

Breathing Exercise: Begin by counting 1 on the inhale through the nose, 2 on the exhale through the mouth, 3 on the inhale, 4 on the exhale, and so on. Continue this pattern, gradually counting up as you alternate between slow inhales and exhales. Extending your exhales longer than your inhales helps slow your heart rate and calm your thoughts.

Finding Out About Sexual Abuse Against Your Child

Discovering that your child has become a victim of sexual abuse is often a devastating and shocking experience for parents. It can evoke a storm of emotions, including disbelief, anger, sadness, or outright shock. Some parents may not feel much or feel numb and focus on sorting everything out for their child. For some parents, this revelation may also bring a sense of relief, as it could explain the concerning changes in their child's behaviour or symptoms that seemed unexplainable. It is natural for parents to experience a range of emotions, and it is important to acknowledge and try to accept any feelings as normal reactions to a very abnormal situation.

No parent is ready nor prepared in any way to face this kind of situation. This is why it is very difficult for parents. We know every parent tries their best and there is always an opportunity to improve by giving the child reassuring messages that show understanding, care, and commitment to helping the child through this challenging time. We have gathered the following messages that are important for a child to hear from their parents after falling victim. The most important role of a parent is to create a sense of safety for their child. These messages can help children feel safe and supported, ultimately fostering their healing process:

- **I will do my best to keep you safe.**
- **I believe you.**
- **None of this is your fault.**
- **You did the right thing by telling. / I understand it was too difficult for you to tell.**
- **I am here whenever you feel ready to talk. / We can find a suitable professional for you to talk when you feel ready.**
- **All your feelings are normal in this abnormal situation.**
- **I love you and I will support you.**
- **I will be here for you, and we will get through this together.**

Understanding What Has Happened to Your Child

Sexual offences by a close offender (e.g., family member, relative, friend, etc.): Discovering such a situation can be devastating as it can often evoke challenging emotions such as betrayal, loss, self-blame, and shame in non-abusing carers and family members. Especially when discovering that a partner has played a role in a child's victimisation, it often brings up difficult emotions of guilt, anger, or even grief for the loss of the relationship and family you thought you had.

Sexual offences by an outsider (e.g., a stranger or an acquaintance): Discovering it can be deeply unsettling, often evoking challenging emotions such as self-blame, anger, or feelings of unsafety.

Sexual offences in digital environments (e.g., grooming, exploitation, sharing of images, etc.): The impacts of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSEA) can be as severe and damaging as in-person sexual abuse. Providing tailored support for victims of OCSEA and their families is essential.

Sibling harmful sexual behaviours/violence (e.g., biological or half-sibling, foster sibling): Sibling harmful sexual behaviour and sibling sexual violence is a hidden reality, with approximately 1 in 25 children experiencing sibling sexual trauma or sibling sexual abuse. Identifying and responding to sibling harmful sexual behaviour and sibling sexual violence can often be challenging, underlining the importance of providing support for navigating such challenging times. Parents and caregivers are often burdened by challenging emotions, such as grief, anger, and shame after learning about sibling harmful sexual behaviour/sexual violence.

Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse

This section provides some statistics of different forms of child sexual abuse. Some parents find this information helpful as it helps to understand the scale of such offences and how the family is not alone. This is particularly important when talking about child sexual abuse which is often a hidden crime and not talked about with others due to the stigma and shame it often involves. If you have such feelings regarding the crime against your child, it is important to remind yourself that shame and guilt does not belong to you, your child, or your family, but solely to the offender. It was not your child's or your fault.

According to 55 studies from 24 countries on prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA), between 8 and 31% of girls and 3 and 17% of boys fall victim to some form of sexual abuse.¹ Additionally, according to recent estimates, over 300 million children have been

¹ Barth, J., Bermetz, L., Heim, E., Trelle, S., & Tonia, T. (2013). The current prevalence of child sexual abuse worldwide: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Public Health*, 58(3), 469-483. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-012-0426-1>

affected specifically by online child sexual abuse and exploitation.² These estimates highlight the global scale of child sexual abuse online and offline.



Common Symptoms of a Traumatic Experience

What is trauma? Trauma is an emotional reaction to a highly intense event that poses a threat or causes harm. This harm can be physical or emotional, real or perceived, and it may affect the child directly or someone close to them. Trauma can stem from a single incident or arise from repeated exposure to multiple adverse events over time.

How do children process trauma? Traumatic experiences can affect children in diverse ways, with some showing few or no visible symptoms while others may exhibit significant challenges. Moreover, different developmental stages impact how a child experiences traumatic events and how they respond to them. Each child processes trauma differently depending on factors such as age, personality, the child's previous experiences, and available support. Some children may appear resilient and continue to function well despite their experiences, while others might struggle with intense emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger. These emotions can sometimes be internalised, making them harder to detect, or they might manifest outwardly through changes in behaviour such as aggression, withdrawal, or difficulties in school.

Child sexual abuse can lead to a range of symptoms and challenges, significantly impacting a child's long-term development and wellbeing if left unsupported. The abuse usually disrupts the child's sense of safety, leading to feelings of fear, shame, and confusion. The impact varies for each child, but healing can begin when they receive the right support and know that they are not alone. For a child, no longer having to carry a distressing secret often brings a sense of relief and opens the door to recovery. It is important to recognise that even if a child seems unaffected on the surface, they may still be struggling with underlying emotional difficulties related to the trauma. It is essential to offer support while also respecting a child's need to cope in their own way, especially if they are not ready to process the trauma at that moment.

² Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute. (2024). Into the light index on child sexual exploitation and abuse globally: 2024 report. Edinburgh: Childlight.



“Depression, anxiety, insomnia, isolation, problems with friendships, withdrawal, irritability, obsession with e.g. cleaning, tearing cuticles, tearing hair, self-harm... There were many unexplained symptoms for which we finally got an explanation.”

Possible Long and Short-Term Negative Impacts of Child Sexual Abuse

Feelings

Mistrust, feeling unsafe
Loneliness
Anxiety
Depression
Panic attacks
Post-traumatic stress
Reduced self-esteem
Inability to regulate emotions
Irritability, aggression
Feeling disconnected or detached from reality, i.e. ‘zoning out’

Thoughts

Difficulty learning and concentrating
Impaired memory
Re-experiencing trauma through disturbing memories, i.e. ‘flashbacks’
Intrusive thoughts or images
Depressive thoughts about past (rumination)
Worries about the future
Suicidal ideation

Behaviour

Social withdrawal (e.g. problems in friendships)
Relationship & intimacy difficulties
Academic difficulties & absences
Substance abuse
Self-harm and suicidal behaviours
Re-victimisation
Running away
Obsession with e.g. cleaning or tearing cuticles/hair
Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities
Any sudden changes in behaviour
Problematic sexualised behaviour

Physical Symptoms

Headaches
Stomach aches or digestive issues
Any other aches and pains
Physical health problems
Sleep disturbances, nightmares
Fatigue
Changes in appetite and/or in eating habits
Bedwetting
Physical sensations such as sweating, nausea, shaking, increased heart rate, rapid breathing



“A lot of absences, school in general becoming more difficult, grades dropping and having fatigue due to sleep problems.”

Talking about and validating feelings as normal in this abnormal situation and maintaining normal routines help a child regain a sense of safety. Below are some materials that strengthen emotion regulation, suitable for younger children. For older

children and teenagers, spending quality time with parents and the entire family is often beneficial; activities like playing board games, watching a movie, or building a puzzle together can foster connection and comfort.

[Big Feelings Come and Go- Storybook \(Canadian Centre for Child Protection\)](#)

[The Kip Crew Manages Their Worries – Activity Booklet \(suojellaanlapsia.fi\)](#)

Impact of Online Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse no longer occurs exclusively in offline settings and may involve online elements. Such technology-facilitated crimes are on the rise – offenders may reach out to children and groom them without the physical proximity. In some cases, offenders coerce or deceive children to share sexualised images and videos of themselves or other children. Such material may later be distributed online by the offender. Any form of child sexual abuse can have lasting effect on children, families, and communities. When sexual violence is recorded, shared, or used to threaten or control a child, it becomes a complex and ongoing form of abuse that subjects victims and survivors to repeated victimisation.³

Feelings and experiences in digital environments can be just as intense and real as those in any physical environment. Emotional responses like joy, sadness, and fear can arise from online interactions, making the impact of what happens on screen deeply meaningful. The consequences of online child sexual abuse can be just as severe and damaging as in-person sexual abuse. In online cases, the absence of physical intimidation can lead child victims to overlook the emotional manipulation and coercive behaviour of the offender, resulting in the child placing undue blame on themselves.⁴ The blame towards the victim might be adopted by those around the child complicating the child’s healing processes. The existence of images of the abuse possibly circulating online might also cause additional fear and anxiety for the victim. Therefore, it is extremely important to believe the child, remind them that they are not to blame and avoid any ‘why’ questions as they tend to increase the victim’s sense of guilt.



“The existence of images has caused acute embarrassment for my child, attempts at blackmail, social anxiety, bullying. Personal safety is impacted and mistrust in general.”

³ Protect Children. (2025). Through the Lens: Insights into Image-Based Child Sexual Violence.

<https://www.protectchildren.fi/en/post/through-the-lens-report>

⁴ Hanson, E. (2017). The impact of online sexual abuse on children and young people. In J. Brown, Online risk to children: Impact, protection and prevention (pp. 97–122). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118977545.ch6>

Children Rarely Disclose to Their Parents

Protect Children has learned through our work with parents and caregivers of children who have fallen victim to sexual abuse that child victims rarely disclose the abuse directly to their parents, even when there is a close relationship. Additionally, children usually hesitate to talk about details of sexual abuse with their parents, even after the parents have become aware of it. This can be deeply distressing for parents, as it may lead them to feel that their child does not trust them or is not close enough to share the painful experiences. The nature of child sexual abuse trauma often involves feelings of shame and confusion, which can make it easier for the child to discuss the experience with a professional or someone outside their close circle, rather than with family members.

Parents often believe that for a child to heal, they must talk about the traumatic event, whether with a parent or a professional. While talking can be helpful for many children, it may not be effective if the child is not yet ready to process the trauma. This might happen later in life. Some children prefer to process their experiences through creative activities like art, music, dance, or play. These methods can feel more natural and accessible for children, allowing them to work through difficult emotions in ways that suit their developmental stage and emotional readiness better. The most important point is that parents support their child to regain the feeling of safety, and that the child knows that they have support available when they feel ready to process the traumatic experiences.



“I spent a lot of time trying to get my child to talk about it all, but she didn’t want to. Then I realised that she had been processing the trauma for a long time through drawing. First the pictures were really dark and then with time they changed”

The Whole Family is Impacted

Sexual violence against a child is violence against the whole family. Parents often describe how their whole life has changed since finding out about the crimes against their child. Parents themselves can suffer with similar trauma symptoms than their children and some parents have described that at time it feels like the abuse has happened to themselves, including the parent experiencing nightmares and flashbacks. This may create additional challenges in the parents’ intimate relationships. However, some parents highlight that the challenges they have faced as a family have brought them closer to each other.



“When one family member is depressed and anxious, it affects everyone as a chain effect, this is also the case with us. When I'm low, so is my partner. Their hair fell out due to stress, s/he has pain, insomnia, etc., just like me.”



“Yes, it has had quite an impact as both of our energy goes to dealing with issues and coping with the challenges our child has. Looking after the relationship and spending time alone just the two of us is really non-existent.”



“We are weathering the storm together.”

Social Life After Finding Out About the Crime Against My Child

Many parents who have attended our You Are Enough™ groups report a significant decline in both the quantity and quality of their social lives after learning about the crime against their child. They attribute this change to several factors, including the stigma surrounding the situation, the inability to openly discuss the matter due to concerns about compromising police investigations, the all-consuming need to support their child, and their own struggles with mental health.



“I have socially isolated myself and have only limited contact with a therapist and social workers. I try to direct all my energy into helping and supporting my child and taking care of all the practical things.”



“I don't feel like being with people. I don't enjoy the company of others, or really anything else. I'd like to be alone as much as possible.”

Parents also note that after disclosing their family's situation to friends and relatives, the response is not always as empathetic or supportive as they had hoped. In some instances, reactions have included shock, blame, or even doubting the child's account. Sometimes, individuals react in undesirable ways when confronted with the topic of

child sexual abuse, often because it triggers their own discomfort or distress. Some may respond with disbelief or blame, as it can be easier to think that such horrific events only happen to children or families facing underlying difficulties. These distorted thoughts often help people to maintain a sense of safety by convincing themselves that it could never happen to them or their children. However, for victims and their families, these reactions often create additional stress and emotional pain.



“I feel that people find it difficult to accept and believe what happened, they don't know what to say.”



“I have isolated myself from my loved ones and friends because I don't have the strength or words to tell them what has happened. I don't dare to speak, and I don't know how to. I also can't pretend that everything is ok.”

Understanding My Own Feelings and Thoughts

You Are Enough™ peer support groups give parents opportunities to share any thoughts and feelings with others who are facing similar challenges. This connection not only helps reduce feelings of isolation but also provides a space to process emotions that might otherwise be too difficult to acknowledge or confront. It is important to allow yourself some time and space to acknowledge the different emotions that you have experienced during this journey of helping your child, yourself, and the whole family through the difficult times. Even those feelings that do not feel right or cause further feelings of guilt such as pity towards the offender or wanting to give up and escape as it is all too overwhelming, are all part of the process. There are no right or wrong feelings.



“Anger, sadness, powerlessness, etc. You have to go through them all. I'm not going crazy.”



“It has been easier for me to recognise and accept the complexity of my own feelings and the fact that what happened also affects my own life on many different levels. I have permission to take time for myself as well. For some reason, hearing that message was important to me and I had not heard it from other authorities or health care professionals.”

After discovering that their child has fallen victim to a crime, parents often enter a "sorting everything out" mode, where they focus solely on managing the crisis and push aside their own needs, leaving no space to process their own emotions. Even though this is a normal process where the mind protects itself by focusing on supporting the child, it is crucial to also make room for a parent's own wellbeing. Failing to do so can lead to exhaustion and burnout in the long run. [Find self-care tips on page 24.](#)

Guilt is a common feeling parents experience, with thoughts like "Why couldn't I keep my child safe?" or "Why didn't my child feel they could tell me?" leading to a sense of inadequacy as a parent. Shame is also a feeling often attached to sexual crimes and with that parents may wonder, "Who can I talk to about this to?" or "Why did this happen to my child and our family?". Hindsight is often part of the process, with thoughts such as "If only I had done this or noticed that", but unfortunately, such thoughts easily lead to unnecessary feelings of guilt. It might help to remind yourself as a parent that the only person responsible is the offender and you have done your best as a parent with the knowledge you had at the time.

Other difficult feelings are also common. Sadness and depression can feel overwhelming, further impacting parents' social lives as they might withdraw or struggle to relate to others. Anger can also arise, directed at the offender, the authorities, the support systems, or even themselves or their child. In some cases, denial may set in, with thoughts like, "It's not that serious—it only happened online, not in real life." All these feelings and thoughts are normal, but they can be difficult for a parent who is sorting out practical matters related to criminal and healing processes and at same time supporting their child.



“I have found most challenging to maintain my own well-being and how it effects on my child and supporting my child.”



“Most difficult is the hopelessness and fear of future.”

Parents attending the You are Enough™ peer support groups have shared the following strategies that have helped them cope when they feel overwhelmed by difficult emotions.

- **Talking to a trusted friend or family member as sharing your thoughts can lighten the emotional load**
- **Connecting with nature and spending time outside as it can be calming and help put things in perspective**
- **Focusing on senses ([see the exercise on page 4](#))**
- **Writing down the difficult feelings ([See our Protect Children Writing Room](#))**
- **Focusing on work related task (this helps some parents while others find work very difficult in which case it is important to take some time off when possible)**
- **Mindfulness exercises: You can find our example [at the bottom of this page](#) (available in Finnish with English subtitles)**
- **Physical activity, whether it is a workout, dancing, or simply stretching as physical movement can release built-up tension**
- **Limiting exposure to overwhelming stimuli, such as social media or news, when feeling particularly vulnerable**



“I sought psychotherapy through my work’s occupational health because my anxiety was so high.”

Understanding My Child’s Feelings and Behaviour

Parents may also worry about their child's symptoms and the future with distressing thoughts such as “Will my child ever heal?”, “Will they engage in self-harm, reckless relationships, or substance use?” or “Will they be able to continue their education?”. Children often deal with difficult feelings differently than adults because they tend to live more in the moment, allowing them to shift quickly from one emotion to another. It is not unusual to see a child laughing and playing shortly after being upset, as they can more easily move past distressing emotions and fully engage themselves in the present.



“It has caused a lot of challenges, isolation, a smaller circle of friends, difficulties in going to school and challenges in participating in different events at school.”

Child victims of sexual abuse may struggle with a range of intense emotions that can profoundly impact their lives. **Depression** may manifest as a lack of motivation to engage in activities, hobbies, or school, making it difficult for children to find joy in things they once loved. **Denial** can surface as a coping mechanism, leading them to feel disconnected from their experiences, as if they are not the child in the painful memories. This can also present as the child, for example, denying being the victim in the images that the police show them. **Fear and worry** are often also part of the victims' life; they may worry about whether others will find out, if the offender will come back, if the police or other adults will believe their story, or if images of the abuse get spread. Thoughts about having to testify in court and whether they will ever heal or trust again can feel overwhelming. These intense feelings often manifest as behavioural issues, as it can be challenging for a child to express their emotions and navigate their confusing or distressing thoughts.

Children who experience trauma may regress to a previous developmental stage, displaying behaviours they had previously outgrown. This regression can manifest as bedwetting, clinginess, or a return to baby talk, as they seek comfort in familiar patterns. This response is a natural reaction to overwhelming experiences, highlighting the need for patience and support in their healing journey. Instead of focusing on such behaviours, it is vital to provide the child with care and support and make them feel as safe as possible.



“She can’t go to school and doesn’t have any good friends. She just lashes out at me all the time and is angry most of the time.”

Naming and validating a child’s difficult feelings with sentences such as “I can see that you are worried. I understand and I’m here for you.” can be very important to a child. Parents often feel compelled to fix their child’s problems by, for example, trying to eliminate the sources of worry in their lives. However, what children usually need most is to know that their parents acknowledge their pain and are there for them. Simple gestures, like reading a bedtime story, offering a hug, or sitting together to watch a movie, can make a significant difference.



“More awareness on my part means that I feel more comfortable and more confident dealing with her anxiety which means that there is more effective support and understanding for my child.”

Some children who have been sexually abused might struggle with strong feelings of **anger**, directed at themselves, the abuser, or the world around them, including their

parents. Whilst anger can feel very difficult for parents to accept and it might bring certain behavioural issues, it is important to note that it is often a vital emotion in the healing process as it can drive change and facilitate the expression of feelings, in contrast to the feeling numb. A child who feels angry needs their emotions to be validated while also having clear behavioural boundaries established to prevent their anger from controlling their life. Parents might feel that they want to make everything easier for their child who has been victimised, but sustaining normal routines and behavioural boundaries provides a sense of safety for the child.



“A lot of absences, school became more difficult, grades dropped, low energy because there has been sleep problems”

Shame is often attached to sexual abuse, causing a child to internalise feelings of guilt and self-blame, with thoughts such as “I should have realised”, “Everyone thinks I am stupid” and “It was my fault,” or fearing that others will judge them based on the abuse targeted at them. This shame and other difficult feelings can lead some to resort to **self-harm** as a coping mechanism, while others may struggle with **suicidal ideation**, feeling that life is unbearable. While these are extremely serious symptoms, and it is always important to seek professional help to deal with such challenges, it is equally important to understand that the child uses these coping mechanisms to cope with overwhelming feelings. Suicidal ideation and self-harm can stem from various reasons, as some might portray self-harming behaviours as a way of finding relief and regaining control, while some as a way of seeking distraction or self-punishment. As the underlying reasons behind suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviours can vary drastically, it is crucial to seek support from mental health professionals. New, healthier coping mechanisms can be learned with the help of professional guidance.



“Trust in adults is broken. It can be seen very clearly on my child and how she even verbalises that she doesn’t trust adults.”

While a child's symptoms and challenges can feel overwhelming, and parents may have significant worries about their child's future, it can be helpful to remember that these symptoms often serve as a way for the child to express difficult feelings related to trauma. Recognising this can help see these behaviours as part of the healing process. Being present as a parent, providing a sense of normalcy and safe routines, and seeking professional support when needed, help a child feel safe and start healing, which in turn often naturally reduces their symptoms and challenging behaviour.



“I now understand as I’ve been listening to others talk about their children, that a lot of the children act out their pain in all different ways.”



“Because when she is lashing out, I now know to stay with it, and it is only her pain.”

Who to tell about the abuse?

There is no definitive answer on who a family should or should not talk to about sexual abuse against their child. Every case is unique, and it's important to remember that what works for some parents may not be suitable for others. Since we can't provide a one-size-fits-all approach for deciding whom parents should or shouldn't talk to about their child's experiences, we've gathered the following tips from You Are Enough™ parents.

Be always mindful of confidentiality and how sharing information may affect your child's privacy and sense of security.

Talk to individuals who can offer emotional support to you and/or your child during this difficult time. It is not helpful to share the news with, e.g., a family member who is likely to struggle to cope with it, as you might end up providing support for them instead of receiving the support you need.

Be mindful of the legal implications and consider how informing someone may affect the ongoing criminal investigation.

It can be challenging to refrain from sharing what has happened to your family, especially when those close to you may sense that something is wrong. However, **you might consider sharing varying levels of detail with different individuals**, keeping the previous advice in mind.

Criminal Processes

The criminal process can be a challenging and lengthy journey for a child victim and the whole family, filled with uncertainty and triggering events. On the other hand, it can bring a feeling of justice and therefore support healing. As the family navigates the criminal system, they may feel overwhelmed by what to expect.



“The legal processes in these cases should be significantly shortened, and additional training should be provided, especially for police officers, on how to treat these victims.”

No parent nor family is usually aware of the criminal processes prior to the situation they are now in. The police interviews and court environments often amplify the child's and parent's anxiety. The prolonged nature of these cases can hinder everyone's healing and especially the child's healing, as they are often unable to fully move forward until the process concludes. You are Enough™ parents often highlight the need for sensitive support throughout the process for both for their child as well as for them. This is why they have shared some tips for those parents who are unfortunately facing the same situation.

Try to make sure that your child has appropriate support throughout the legal proceedings and acknowledge that the best support is not always the parent as a child might prefer having an outsider as a support person in the room. Different countries have different victim support services available.

Try to think carefully as a parent whether you want to read the pre-court investigation documents that police will put together. For some parents it is helpful to find out about all the small details, but for others it is distressing hoping that they had never read such a document. Ask yourself “Why do I need to read this document?” and “Will reading all the detailed information help me support my child?” There is no right or wrong answer, but it is good to consider what is the best option for you.

If you choose to read the documents and attend police hearings, **it is important to ensure that you also have support available**. Many parents have found it beneficial to have a friend waiting in the lobby when they leave the hearings or supporting and offering comfort when they have read any of the investigation document.

It might be helpful to think of the courtroom as a theatrical setting where each professional and participant has a certain role. For example, defence lawyers are there to come up with any details that might weaken the case for the prosecution. This might be very upsetting to the victim and their family, and, at times, it might feel that the defence team does not believe that any crime has happened or that it believes that the victim is somehow to be blamed. It can be helpful to keep in mind that their questions or notions do not actually reflect whether they believe that a crime happened or not, but they simply are there to do their job and defend their client. If the legal process results in a negative outcome, it does not determine whether the crime occurred; it simply indicates that there wasn't sufficient evidence to prove the sexual crime against your child.

Healing

The healing process for every child victim of sexual abuse is different and each child's journey towards recovery is shaped by unique factors. While abuse is a significant risk factor that often affects a child's wellbeing negatively, various factors also influence a

child's resilience, and how they cope in the face of adversity. Every child has their own set of protective factors that play a crucial role in fostering resilience. We have gathered, with the help of You Are Enough™ parents, the following examples of protective factors that can help children navigate difficult times and move forward on their path to healing.

Strong Family Support: Having a close, supportive relationship with parents or caregivers who provide love, stability, and understanding can significantly aid in the child's healing process.

Positive Relationships with Trusted Adults: Support from other trusted adults, such as teachers, relatives, or mentors, can provide additional emotional security and guidance.

Safe and Stable Environment: Ensuring the child has a consistent and safe home and school environment helps in regaining a sense of safety and provides a sense of normalcy.

Open Communication: Encouraging the child to talk about their feelings and experiences without judgment fosters a sense of validation and helps them process the trauma. (However, it is equally important not to force your child to talk about the traumatic events or feelings if your child is not ready).

Access to Mental Health Support: Professional support from counsellors, psychologists, psychotherapists, or support groups can be crucial in helping the child understand and cope with their emotions.

Positive Friendships and Peer Support: Relationships with understanding friends can provide a sense of belonging and decrease feelings of isolation.

Healthy Coping Skills: Teaching and encouraging activities such as physical exercise, creative expression, or relaxation techniques can help the child manage stress and build resilience.

Sense of Control and Empowerment: Involving the child in decisions that affect their life can help restore a feeling of control and autonomy.

Academic Support and School Stability: Maintaining regular school attendance and supporting the child's educational needs can promote a sense of normalcy and purpose.

Cultural and Community Connections: Engaging in cultural, spiritual, or community activities can offer additional layers of support and a sense of identity.



“The most helpful has been understanding what happened and why. Also, closeness, emotional awareness and support, understanding of trauma, and how it can manifest in behaviour. Getting support for our child, empower them to realise that they did nothing wrong as well as talking to a confidential, safe professional has also helped.”

You Are Enough

While professional support can be crucial for children experiencing severe symptoms of trauma, parents play an invaluable role in their child's lives while they recover from trauma of sexual abuse. Research, including a systematic review of 25 studies examining risk and protective factors, has shown that the only significant protective factor against future victimisation is *perceived parental care*⁵. This highlights the immense value of parental support as when children feel supported by their parents or caregivers, their risk of falling victim to further abuse is decreased. When parents ask us how they can help their child heal, we reassure them that they are already making a significant difference simply by being a parent and being present in their child's everyday life. By providing a sense of normalcy and stability, parents help their child regain a sense of safety which is the most important element for healing.



“My child feels better, when I feel better.”

Getting Professional Support for Your Child

Depending on the country, children who have experienced abuse usually have access to various support services designed to help them heal and recover. These may include counselling and therapy, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT), which helps them process their experiences and develop coping strategies. Child advocacy centres may provide a coordinated approach, offering medical, legal, and therapeutic support in one place. Additionally, helplines and online support services offer confidential advice and assistance for those who may not be ready for in-person support. In some cases, specialised medical care may be provided by, e.g., youth psychiatry services to address more severe needs related to trauma.

If you are looking privately for a therapist for your child to process their traumatic experiences, it is essential to ensure that the professional providing this care is fully qualified. In countries like Finland, professionals with training in psychotherapy or psychology typically have a solid foundation and the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively support children who have experienced trauma. Qualifications and standards can vary by country though, so seeking advice from local healthcare providers can be helpful. If not clarified during the initial appointment with the therapist, it might be helpful

⁵ Scoglio, A. A. J., Kraus, S. W., Saczynski, J., Jooma, S., & Molnar, B. E. (2019). Systematic review of risk and protective factors for revictimization after child sexual abuse. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018823274>

to ask the following questions to confirm that they have the necessary qualifications and experience to support your child effectively:

- **What specific training have you received in trauma-focused therapies for children?**
- **What is your experience with treating children who have fallen victim to sexual abuse? And specifically, those who have fallen victim online?**
- **How do you involve parents or caregivers in the treatment process?**



“Most helpful has been the therapy for our child and good communication with her (well not always, but sometimes) and also with the child’s father.”

Ensuring That the Educational Setting is Supporting Your Child

It is important that educational settings provide support for a traumatised child, as trauma can temporarily impair cognitive functions, such as concentration, memory, and problem-solving abilities. Schools and colleges have the potential to serve as safe, nurturing spaces where children can begin to rebuild a sense of safety, which is vital for developing resilience and healing from traumatic experiences. By collaborating with trusted professionals in the education setting and helping them understand your child’s situation, the school will hopefully offer tailored support to your child.



“School is the only aspect of his life that has remained reasonable. Although it requires a lot of support for him to actually get to school in the morning.”

Schools can support a child, for example, by providing a designated area where the child can go to take a break and feel safe and calm when overwhelmed or provide tutoring or modified assignments to help the child keep up with schoolwork without additional stress. Some educational settings also provide additional emotional support by offering access to a school counsellor or a psychologist who can provide individual support.

New Version of Us as a Family

Violence against a child and the consequential trauma profoundly affects the entire family. Parents often describe a clear distinction between life before and after their child’s disclosure or the call from the law enforcement. While the impact of trauma can

be long-lasting, families can work toward regaining a stable and comfortable life together. Some parents have even noted positive changes following the acute shock of abuse, such as a newfound closeness among family members and a greater focus on the most meaningful aspects of life. This journey, though often extremely challenging, can lead to so-called trauma growth and enhance resilience leading to even deeper connections within the family.



“Seek help and support from all sources, even when your strength is running low. Parent's well-being is directly related to their child's well-being and healing. No one can understand and offer support quite like another parent who has faced the same. It is possible to rise above all that darkness.”

Safety Skills

It is important to avoid providing safety skills guidance immediately after your child has been victimised, as this can intensify feelings of guilt, leading to thoughts like, “I should have known what to do” or “It was my fault for not acting safely.”. You as a parent typically know your child best, but below are some tips on when and what type of safety education might be beneficial to help prevent further harm.

Once the child and the entire family have navigated the acute aftermath of abuse, and the child is showing fewer symptoms or has, e.g., remained stable in school, it may be a good time to ensure they have essential information about boundaries and relationships. Since the child's body boundaries have been violated, additional education on this topic, as well as digital safety skills, can be beneficial. Here are some materials that can be used as a helpful tool with children depending on their age:

[The Kip Crew Learns About Body Boundaries - Activity booklet \(suojellaanlapsia.fi\)](https://suojellaanlapsia.fi)

[#MyFriendToo | Suojellaan Lapsia](https://suojellaanlapsia.fi)

[Stop, Slow & Go -digital platform \(suojellaanlapsia.fi\)](https://suojellaanlapsia.fi)

[Let's talk about digital safety skills - Guide \(suojellaanlapsia.fi\)](https://suojellaanlapsia.fi)

Normal Development vs Trauma-Related Behaviour

Distinguishing between behaviour related to trauma and, e.g., ‘typical teenage behaviour’, can be challenging for parents. It is essential for parents to take off, what we call in our You are Enough™ groups, “the trauma glasses” at times to create space for the child to express themselves related to their normal developmental stage. While fostering independence can be difficult, especially after a child has been victimised, allowing them to explore their autonomy is crucial for rebuilding their confidence and sense of normalcy. Supporting this process helps the child regain a sense of control and further

facilitates their healing journey. Parents in You are Enough™ groups have found the following tips on letting their child get independent helpful:

Start with small steps toward independence, allow your child to make choices in a safe environment while gradually increasing their autonomy. This is extremely difficult because of all the worrying thoughts but we encourage you to try as it is so important for the child.

Have honest conversations with your child about your feelings and concerns. Let your child know that while you want to support their independence, your worries stem from past traumatic events. Emphasise that you can practice this journey together, gradually working toward greater independence.

Practice mindfulness or relaxation techniques to manage anxious thoughts and focus on the present rather than worst-case scenarios when your child is not with you and worry. This is not easy at all but practising regularly makes it a little easier.



“It is important to seek and accept support, and to remember that you will get through this over time.”

Hope! (Hold On, Pain Ends)

Having hope for the future significantly enhances mental wellbeing by fostering resilience, which is essential for healing from traumatic experiences and moving toward recovery.⁶ When you hold onto hope, your child notices or senses it too. As a family you are then more likely to engage in positive coping strategies and seek support, which can significantly enhance everyone’s mental wellbeing and facilitate recovery. Ultimately, hope reminds everybody in the family that recovery is possible.



“I feel more encouraged to think that even though I don't know yet how to deal with all the situations that come up, especially with my child’s mental health difficulties and wider family relations I will find solutions that work well for us.”



“What happened can't be ignored, but you can learn to live with it. What happened does not define me or my child. I appreciate myself more and listen to myself more. I am also more present to the family and enjoy the good times we have.”

⁶ Long, L. J., & Gallagher, M. W. (2017). Hope and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In M. W. Gallagher, and S. J. Lopez (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Hope, Oxford Library of Psychology. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199399314.013.24>

Self-Care Tips

Below, we have listed additional self-care tips, exercises, and resources that might be helpful to you, your child, and your family. We hope that these resources can help you find the routines and exercises that suit you and your needs best.

Self-Care Tips to Support You in the Healing Process

Practice Self-Awareness and Self-Compassion. Learning to pay attention to your emotions, thoughts, and behaviour can help you recognise distressing and destructive patterns and shift towards self-compassion. To support self-reflection, you can keep a journal or engage in other creative activities.

Engage in Self-Soothing Activities. Identifying and engaging in activities that help you regulate emotions can help manage distressing thoughts or emotions.

Body Awareness and Physical Grounding Exercises

Body Scan. In this exercise, focus on your physical sensations throughout your body to help manage distressing thought or emotions: Focus on each part of your body, starting at your feet. Focus on the physical sensations you might feel: the ground, the room temperature, the feeling of clothing, muscle tension and relaxation, the weight of your body. Move up from your feet and scan your whole body all the way up to your head.

Physiological Sigh. This technique, also known as cyclic sighing, helps relieve stress and anxiety. It involves a pattern of breathing of two inhaled followed by an extended exhale: Inhale deeply, followed by a shorter, second inhalation and then extended exhalation. Even 1 or 2 physiological sighs can lower the level of stress and alertness.

Sensory Grounding Exercises

3-3-3 Grounding Technique. In this exercise, focus on the surrounding environment to help activate your parasympathetic nervous system and relieve stress: Name three things you see, identify three sounds you can hear, and focus on three things you can feel or touch.

Cognitive Grounding Exercises

Naming categories. This exercise can help in managing distressing thoughts or emotions. Choose any category, such as colours, hobbies, or plants, and name as many items as you can from that category.

Cognitive Reorientation. This technique can help disrupt negative, distressing, or destructive thoughts. Re-orient yourself in time and place by asking yourself questions such as: Where am I? How old am I? What is the date? What year is it? What season is it?

- **Creating a Safe Place.** If you are struggling with distressing thoughts or emotions, creating a safe place can help calm your mind and your body and increase your sense of safety. Learn more about the safe place exercise [here](#).

2KNOW

knowledge to prevent