

Practice guide



Someone I Care about may
be a Sex Offender

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Someone I care about may be a sex offender

This booklet is aimed at helping those close to someone who has been accused of sexual abuse. When allegations come to light it can be difficult for all those involved but particularly if you are a partner, parent or friend of the accused. The allegations may concern the present or recent past involving children, or the allegations could be of an historic nature and the person, now an adult, has spoken out. In the case of internet misuse it may have been going on for some time, unknown to anyone else.

We are indebted to the comments of *Keith, whose twenty one year old son, *Michael, was convicted of downloading indecent images of young girls and *Debbie, whose husband committed similar offences. It was a distressing time for both families as they sought to come to terms with what had happened as well as deal with the fall-out on relationships and within the local community. (*names have been changed)

First Reactions

If you are in this situation and you sense there may be some truth behind the allegations, you are likely to experience a range of emotions. You may also need to make decisions that will have a significant impact not only on your own life but on the lives of other family members and those close to you.

Similarly, you may be shocked by the allegations and struggle to believe they are true. You may want to know what to do to in order to prove they are untrue. You are worried about people knowing particularly if the situation is reported in the press.

Following the initial shock, there may be a sense of outrage, bewilderment and confusion. How could this happen? This person you thought you knew may have a dark side, a secret that you knew nothing about. How could you not have known? How could this secret have been kept hidden?

You may then feel disgust, intense anger and betrayal. How could they let you down in such a way and expose you to public humiliation? If your own children have been affected this is perhaps the most difficult situation imaginable, to think that someone you loved and trusted could have harmed them without you knowing.

It is not unusual for partners, parents or friends to feel shame and a false sense of guilt. Sometimes they will question whether they are to blame for the abuse by not adequately meeting their partner's sexual needs, but this is never the cause of the sexual abuse of children. Feelings of shame are contagious; the closer you are the more you feel affected by it. It is also not uncommon for family and/or friends to be convinced of the alleged abuser's innocence or remain in denial due to a misguided sense of loyalty.

The situation can become even more complex if say, a wife or mother wants to stand by her partner despite the allegations against him. It is crucial all allegations are investigated and the truth established for the sake of everyone involved. Each situation is individual and social services, police liaison officers and those close to you whom you trust will be able to help determine the levels of risk and how to respond.

Keith:

'When I found out what Michael had done I felt shock, bewilderment, disbelief. Anger came last; it crystallized as the day wore on. I was angry with my son but also angry that the images were so readily available. On my way to the police station I remembered Michael as a babe in arms and thought, this can't be happening!'

Debbie:

At first it just feels numb, thoughts can't process properly and sleep is hard. It's good to know this is normal. You wonder what else they have done and whether you can trust them.'

The Investigation Process

The statutory agencies (i.e. Children's or Adult Social Services, police) have a duty to respond to an allegation of abuse. Depending on the ages of the alleged victims and the seriousness of the allegation, children and vulnerable adults in particular may be interviewed by a specially trained social worker and / or police officer. The person accused of the allegation may also be interviewed by the police.

Following an arrest the family may well be advised to discuss the situation on a 'need to know' basis only due to the obvious sensitivities and adverse reactions of others. This is a very difficult and stressful time because those involved have to live with some degree of uncertainty. Partners in particular may feel they are in an impossible situation especially if the allegation is denied.

A natural reaction to anything that contradicts what we think we know is to dismiss or deny it. Some thoughts are just too disturbing and unpleasant to entertain, and that's one of the reasons why there is so much denial surrounding sexual abuse. 'It couldn't happen!' is a common response. Most of us prefer to live in a world that conforms to our expectations.

It needs to be recognised that with regard to sexual abuse, it can and does happen – much more frequently that we would like to think. It happens in all sorts of situations; it happens to all sorts of children; and all sorts of people are perpetrators. The caricature of the 'evil paedophile' portrayed in the media really doesn't help. If you think about it, what child

would trust such a frightening character or allow someone like that to get close to them? Sex offenders are, in other respects, ordinary people just like anyone else.

To acknowledge the possibility of a child we know being abused by a person we know may require us to suspend disgust, disbelief and/or a natural instinct to defend them. Being open to the possibility that such a thing could have happened is very hard when we are close to the person involved. However, we owe it to the child or adult to take what they are saying seriously.

Keith:

'The police behaved impeccably throughout, from their initial raid on our house at seven o'clock in the morning, through the questioning and on-going investigation. They had to get all the facts and the questioning was tough – as it needed to be - but they did make an effort to minimise the impact on us as a family. I was horrified by some of the images Michael had downloaded, and I blamed myself – how could I not have picked up on what he'd been doing? The ID photographing, fingerprinting and DNA test on Michael was completely surreal.'

Debbie:

'Having my house searched, clothes drawers rifled and possessions taken for investigation was extremely distressing especially for the children who didn't understand what was going on. It's not something you expect to happen to an ordinary family.'

After the investigation

The aim of an investigation is to try to determine whether abuse has actually occurred. Unfortunately this isn't always possible. If a perpetrator admits the abuse then this makes working with them and thereby reducing the risk of re-offending more likely to be successful. If they continue to deny the allegations then some degree of uncertainty may remain even after the investigation has ended.

Quite often there is an absence of corroborative evidence; it is the word of the victim(s) against that of the alleged perpetrator. This is one of the main reasons many allegations of sexual abuse never reach the courts.

In other situations, the matter does go to Court which can take a long time and there can be many hold ups along the way. The whole situation can be frightening and confusing. Meanwhile, you might feel your life is on hold, waiting for the outcome.

However, even if there is insufficient evidence to proceed with a criminal prosecution, Children's Services can still take action if they consider a child is at risk of significant harm. This can include a protection plan being prepared in respect of any children involved and in the most serious situations an application can be made to the court for a child to be placed in care.

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Keith:

'Fortunately Michael admitted the charges straight away and made no attempt to hide what he'd done. This made it easier for everyone and Michael is now attending a treatment programme.'

Debbie: '

When people find out it can be very distressing. Hatred is one reaction so it's good to talk and get help from those you trust.'

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Don't rush into making decisions

The impact of such an experience should never be underestimated. If a parent (usually a woman) discovers her partner may be guilty of abuse, she is likely to have to make some agonising decisions over what is best for the whole family. The children's immediate safety and well-being is paramount and this could mean a period of separation from her partner. It is important she doesn't feel under pressure or rush into making decisions that are going to affect the long-term future or her family.

An inconclusive outcome

There are some cases where the outcome of an investigation is inconclusive and this presents challenges for everyone involved, the authorities, partners, parents, relatives, friends, and the church in some cases. We have said already, that those close to the alleged abuser can find it very difficult to accept the allegations of victims. This may be, in part, because

they don't have all the information surrounding the allegations. They may only hear the abuser's denials and/or minimisations and the victim, whose confidentiality is protected, is not heard. When there is a court hearing then at least the evidence is out in the open. This can help challenge an abuser's denials and help to bring some sort of closure for those affected.

A false allegation is a possibility but as allegations are generally denied anyway, proving guilt or innocence is often not possible. If doubts remain not only can this be difficult to live with but the potential risk to children or vulnerable adults remains.

Offering support

If you want to continue to offer support to someone suspected/convicted of abuse your acceptance of them, whatever the outcome of the investigation, can make a real difference. The fact that you don't reject them even though you find their alleged or actual behaviour abhorrent can provide hope for the future. The allegations and the investigation will undoubtedly have a life-long impact, even when unsubstantiated. Major readjustments may need to be made and things are unlikely ever to be the same again. It is possible to support the person even when what they have done, or been accused of causes you great upset.

'Michael was given a non-custodial sentence and we decided he could live at home as long as he kept to the conditions of his sentence – he wasn't allowed unsupervised access to the internet so we removed his modem. We also had to make sure he wasn't left in the house alone with anyone under sixteen. Michael has spoken of his regret at what happened and wants boundaries put in place.'

Facing the consequences – keeping in contact

The sexual abuse of children is a serious criminal offence and if convicted the person may serve a prison sentence. Sex offenders often feel lonely, isolated, and unforgivable, so contact made by, say, a pastoral carer can be a lifeline.

Regular visits by family or friends can help keep valued relationships alive and make reintegration into society easier. However, pressure should not be exerted and victims never coerced into visiting the offender. Children in particular are vulnerable to suggestion and might well feel that it's their fault the person is in prison.

Forgiveness and Restoration

Confession and forgiveness are central themes of the Christian faith. A sincere apology can make a real difference to all those affected, though this should never be allowed to become yet another way of the offender gaining control over the people involved. Neither does this mean that the

offender will not have to live with the consequences of their actions, carrying on with their lives as though nothing had happened. However repentant they may have been, and even though they may have sought forgiveness from God and their victim(s), it does not mean that they might not reoffend when faced with the same situation. Also, it is important to bear in mind that some victims will choose not to forgive. Others may struggle to reach a place where they can forgive an offender.

Due to the addictive nature of sex offending, a judge may decide it is not safe for the person to return home because they are considered too great a risk. Equally, family members may not want the person back even if there has been an admission of guilt, a desire to change and/or put things right. Family members and others may not want any contact with the person or only on a restricted or supervised basis.

An offender may attend a rehabilitation programme which also helps the probation service assess future risk. They can feel overwhelmed at the prospect of change, particularly to their lifestyle, as what were once considered ordinary activities, such as giving lifts to children, become out of bounds.

One offender, realising the gravity of what they had done stated, 'I have learnt that I have to put boundaries around myself for the rest of my life'.

Keith:

'I can forgive Michael's failings but I will never forget what happened. What he did was definitely not OK but it would have been much harder if he'd been unrepentant. We now need to get on with our lives. However I think I will always be alert to the dangers now and be extra vigilant where Michael is concerned.

Reintegration – Is this possible?

It is important to recognise that churches cannot be all things to all people but efforts can be made to ensure pastoral care is available without compromising the safety of children.

On release from prison or as part of on-going supervision, churches should make contact with and act on the advice of the probation service and/or MAPPA (Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements) and if the person's name is placed on the Sex Offenders Register, they will be required to give a known address and information about community groups they join (including churches). MAPPA assesses and manages the most serious sexual and violent offenders. With the aid of these statutory agencies a risk assessment can be carried out. In some situations the individual can be referred to another church where, for example, there are no children and/or they can be properly supervised.

Reintegration into the family home where an offender has abused their child(ren) is rare. It sometimes happens following much work with the

offender and the partner agreeing to a monitoring role, much like a police/probation officer.

In any event you, as the partner, parent or friend of the person may be in a position to help them accept any statutory supervision and other requirements. This might include limitations placed upon them in relation to contact with children, particularly in a church situation where they may need to abide by a written contract. A contract does not mean an automatic ban from church life - rather a supervised arrangement where the offender can be valued and supported.

Conclusion

There are several organisations that are equipped to offer help and support in various ways if you find yourself in this situation. The organisations are listed overleaf. It is important for your own well-being and those close to you that you don't become isolated or feel you have to struggle on alone.

Do remember that CCPAS has a 24 hour helpline and we are always willing to listen and support you in any way we can!

CCPAS strongly recommends this booklet is read alongside 'Help, sex offenders and church attendance' where there is further information on risk, boundaries, forgiveness and contracts. The booklet can be found on the CCPAS website: www.ccpas.co.uk or purchased from the CCPAS online shop.

This is one of an expanding series of **Practice Guides** published by CCPAS, many of which are particularly relevant to workers.

See CCPAS website for more details www.ccpas.co.uk



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