



Glossary: Child Sexual Abuse

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse has published 'What you need to know about Child Sexual Abuse' (March 2025) to introduce key research and statistics on what is known about Child Sexual Abuse (CSA); what it is, who harms children and young people, where it takes place, the impact and what we can do in response. [You can read the report here.](#)

Terms commonly used in the context of Child Sexual Abuse in the UK

These terms are used to describe the experiences of children and young people who have been victims of sexual abuse and to provide clarity and consistency in communication about these experiences. It is important to use these terms correctly to avoid perpetuating stigma and to support the rights and needs of those affected.

- **Children:** Anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. The fact that a child has reached 16 years of age, is living independently or is in further education, is a member of the armed forces, is in hospital or in custody in the secure estate, does not change their status or entitlements to services or protection.
- **Child Sexual Abuse (CSA):** Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts, such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing, and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.
- **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM):** [Child sexual abuse material](#) refers to any content that depicts sexually explicit activities involving a child. Visual depictions include photographs, videos, live streaming, and digital or computer generated images, including AI-generated content, often indistinguishable from an actual child. CSAM, better describes the reality of this crime, rather than the term of [child pornography](#). Pornography implies consent, which a child can *never* give. It's important we use terminology that reflects the impact of this crime on its victims. The term **Child Sexual Abuse Imagery** may also be used.
- **Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE):** Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of Child Sexual Abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur using technology.

- **Consent:** It is a criminal offence (sexual assault) if you have sex with someone when you or they are under the age of 16, even if you have both given consent. The law assumes that children under the age of 13 do not have the capacity to consent to sex and this would be classed as statutory rape. However, although it is still against the law, young people aged 13 to 15 are unlikely to get into trouble *if the sexual activity is consensual and there is no evidence of exploitation*. The [Sexual Offences Act 2003](#) says that someone consents to sexual activity if they agree by choice and have both the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If someone says 'no' to any kind of sexual activity, they are not agreeing to it. But, if someone doesn't say 'no' out loud, that doesn't automatically mean that they have agreed to it either. Though a 16-18 year old can have consensual sex, this must not be with a person who has authority over them and the person must not be in a position of power. This applies regardless of whether the relationship is not 'traumatic' for the young person.
- **Disclosure:** The act of a child or survivor sharing information about abuse. Disclosures may be direct, indirect, purposeful, or accidental. Understanding the dynamics of disclosure is crucial for professionals.
- **Exploitation:** Refers to the taking advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity.
- **Grooming:** The process by which an offender prepares a child, significant adults, or the environment for abuse. Grooming can occur online or offline and may involve building trust, manipulating emotions, or desensitising the child to sexual content. **Online Grooming:** A subset of grooming that specifically involves digital platforms, social media, gaming, or messaging apps.
- **Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB):** is a term used to describe sexual actions that are outside what is safe for a young person's stage of development. It includes actions that can harm either the child or young person themselves, or another person. It is hard for us to think about children and young people sexually abusing other children and young people, and it isn't always easy to tell the difference between abusive and normal sexual behaviours in children. Children, particularly in younger age groups, might engage in such behaviour without knowing that it is wrong or abusive. [View more information at Lucy Faithful Foundation, including the Traffic Light Tool and video clip.](#)
- **Image-Based Sexual Abuse:** The non-consensual sharing or threatening to share sexual images or videos, often used to coerce or control victims. May also be referred to as **Sextortion** or **Revenge Porn**.
- **Non-recent sexual abuse:** Non-recent abuse, sometimes referred to as **historical abuse**, is an allegation of abuse made by or on behalf of someone who is now 18 years or over, relating to an incident which took place when the alleged victim was under 18 years old. *(Note: We avoid using the term historic, as it may imply the abuse no longer has an impact on the victim/ survivor.)*
- **Pornography:** An image is "pornographic" if it is of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been produced solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal. [\(Source: Legislation UK\)](#) This should not be confused with **Child Sexual Abuse Imagery**.
- **Problematic Sexual Behaviours (PSB):** is an umbrella term to describe 'inappropriate' or 'problematic' sexual behaviours.

Inappropriate behaviour

- Single instances of developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour.
- Behaviour that is socially acceptable within a peer group but would be considered inappropriate outside that group.
- Generally consensual and reciprocal.



- May involve an inappropriate context for behaviour that would otherwise be considered normal.

Problematic behaviour

- Developmentally unusual and socially unexpected behaviour.
- May be compulsive.
- Consent may be unclear, and the behaviour may not be reciprocal.
- May involve an imbalance of power.
- Doesn't have an overt element of victimisation.

For further information watch this [NSPCC video](#).

- **Survivor:** Refers to persons who have suffered harm and victimization, either interchangeably or in combination with the term "victim."
- **Technology-Assisted Child Sexual Abuse (TACSA):** happens when a child under the age of 18 is harmed by someone who has used technology to enable sexual abuse. It can take place in many different forms, and it impacts children and young people from across the globe regardless of their religious, ethnic and cultural background, sexuality, gender, disability status or social class.
- **Victim:** Refers to a child or person who has been subjected to harmful and/or criminal acts. Thus, serving to define them as rights-holders and avoid any form of responsibility or blame being placed on them.

Further advice:

- [Pan Bedfordshire Safeguarding Partnership website](#) for localised policies and procedures, including links to training.
- [Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse](#) has a wealth of information, resources and training.
- [Stop It Now!](#) Providing help and support if you're worried about someone else's illegal or harmful online behaviour. Confidential helpline: [0808 1000 900](#)
- [Internet Watch Foundation \(IWF\)](#) Provides advice and support to improve internet safety and protect children.
- [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command \(CEOP\) Education](#) National Crime Agency advice for parents, children and young people on staying safe from sexual abuse and online grooming.
- [The Marie Collins Foundation](#) Helping children and their families to recover if you've suffered abuse online or through mobile technology.
- [The Lucy Faithful Foundation](#) Charity dedicated to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- [NSPCC](#) A charity working to protect children and prevent abuse.
- [Get Safe Online](#) Free advice on how to stay safe online and protect your internet-connected devices.
- FlashGetKids has a [guide](#) on sexual slang.

