**Assistance for children & young people who have been sexually abused**

**Being Safe – Feeling Safe – Keeping Safe**
Beginning with safety in the here and now, it is important to demonstrate that personal safety has been considered in a manner which is understood, believed and felt by the child or young person. This is why a transparency of approach is absolutely essential – it extends an opportunity of being in control, and demonstrates that there are no hidden intentions. This is an aspiration, as it may take some considerable time for a child or young person to feel able to trust both the practitioner and the therapeutic process. He or she may have already been let down and betrayed by the person who committed the sexual abuse, so being asked to trust another person at this stage may at the least be ambitious.

It is important that the principles and ideas behind a proposed plan of therapeutic work are declared and shared openly with the child or young person, alongside someone with whom they may at least have established some level of trust, and that they are offered an informed choice about taking part. A child or young person should not be pushed, pressured or forced into post-abuse therapeutic work, as this will be experienced as an immediate loss of control, and will run the risk of further compounding the impact of the abuse already experienced.

Clearly stated ground rules that highlight safety, and re-state the choices and options will help maintain the young person’s sense of being in control. Some children and young people will welcome a written and signed set of ground rules, others may find this intimidating, and feel safer with a verbal process. At this stage, the issue of confidentiality will need to be discussed, in terms of maintaining the safety of the child or young person, and any other person who may be at risk of harm. There may be particular issues about confidentiality if the child or young person is waiting to appear as witness to their abuse in an impending court case, where some details of the therapeutic work may have to be disclosed.

**Telling**
Once safety has been established, and tested out, and the nature and purpose of the work has been set out, some children and young people will be able to begin to tell their story, in an off-loading manner, with little prompting. Others will require more directive help and support in unfolding their story – using thoughts and feelings cards, drawing, cartooning, play and so on, in accordance with their age and development (see Durham 2003 for further details). It is essential that in telling his or her story, the child or young person feels that he or she has been heard and believed.

**Placing responsibility with the abuser**
In having listened to the story, it is important for the practitioner to emphasise strongly that the child or young person is not responsible for being sexually abused. This is a message that needs to be repeated at every opportunity, in a manner which has meaning for the child or young person. The child or young person needs to be informed that there is a simple equation – the abuser is one hundred percent responsible, which leaves him or her with absolutely no responsibility for being sexually abused. For younger children word-guessing games are useful – with the answer being ‘it was not my fault’, or ‘I was made to believe it was my fault and now I know that it wasn’t’. Writing these and other messages in multiple colours alongside doodles on flip chart paper is also helpful.

For other children and young people, the process of feeling responsible – how this would have most likely been manipulated by the abuser – may have to be explored more specifically and more explicitly in relation to the details of the abuse, and the feelings involved. It is helpful to explore the abuse in terms of the young person having in many varying respects, less power than the abuser, and what this means in terms of the limitations it placed on what they could have done to escape. In hearing the child or young person’s story in detail, there will likely be many examples of resistance and attempts to limit the impact of the abuse – ‘I closed my eyes’, ‘I didn’t go back’, ‘I went back so that I wouldn’t be hit as well’, ‘I told my mum’ and so on. These need to be identified and built upon, with an emphasis on the child or young person’s competency and survival. Ultimately, there needs to be a return to the simple equation that the abuser was totally responsible. If he (she) was not there, it would not have happened.

**Telling family**
Once the child or young person has told about their sexual abuse, depending on the circumstances, there may be significant changes to his or her family relationships, which will need to be explored and discussed. It is often difficult for families to hear that their children have been sexually abused, particularly if the abuse has been committed by a family friend or a family member. Families may often have mistaken beliefs about sexual abuse. Some preparatory work with family members may therefore be necessary. The child or young person may wish to tell their family in their own time, or not at all. Here it may be necessary to explore with the child, how a wish for privacy or more accurately secrecy, may be related to notions of feeling responsible, and how secrecy can maintain and propagate these feelings and beliefs. They may wish for some family members to know, and for others not to know. Essentially, as far as possible, in terms of safety and protection, telling has to be the choice of the child or young person.

**Help with legal processes: police – court – compensation**Legal processes can be very threatening for children and young people who have been sexually abused, they are likely to require support and advocacy in negotiating these complex and challenging circumstances. Some children and young people will have completed their involvement with the legal system, by the time they have chosen to receive therapeutic support, for example the abuse may have happened in earlier childhood, or a decision may have been taken not to prosecute.

Here there may be a wish to look back and discuss these processes, either in a search for information, understanding and meaning, or as part of a need for support and recovery. Children and young people often have difficulties with their cross-examination, where they may feel that they have been intimidated and accused publicly of telling lies.

Quite often, for a child or young person who has been sexually abused, a court trial is a no win situation. If a prosecution has not succeeded, the child or young person is left with fears about not being believed, and private speculations as to who else may follow suit. If the prosecution has been successful, he or she may have to come to terms with somebody they know and trusted, and possibly loved, having to face a prison sentence.

Losing a parent or a sibling may have an equal or worse impact than being sexually abused, particularly if the abuser is the main care-giver. It is therefore very important for a child or young person, where possible and safe, to have choice about how their abuse is reported and whether or not they wish to attend a court trial. If he or she wishes to attend the trial, then it must be made clear that the outcome may not be what the child wishes, and that there is a difference between believing something has happened, and proving it beyond reasonable doubt in a court of law, and that the secrecy and hidden nature of child sexual abuse militates against the latter. There are many cases of child sexual abuse which do not even reach the court trial stage.

The government guidance [Provision of Therapy for a Child Witness Prior to a Criminal Trial](http://www.cps.gov.uk/publications/prosecution/therapychild.html) was produced in response to concerns that child witnesses, were being denied “therapy” pending the outcome of a criminal trial, for fear that evidence could be tainted and the prosecution lost. This concern may conflict with the need to ensure that child victims are able to receive, as soon as possible, immediate and effective therapeutic intervention to assist their recovery. It is also recognised that many child victims express the wish to see their abuser convicted and punished. The primary conclusion of this guidance states that those involved in the prosecution of an alleged abuser have no authority to prevent a child from receiving therapy.

A re-ordering of a therapeutic programme would allow factual details of the child or young person’s abuse to be discussed at a later stage, after the court trial, whilst, allowing many of the contextual impact issues relating to sexuality and other fears and anxieties to be addressed more immediately, alongside providing support, building self-esteem and establishing trust (Durham 2003).In undertaking such work, it may be necessary for the practitioner to produce reports and explain his or her actions at the court trial.

Following a criminal trial, or in the absence of a criminal trial, it may be possible for the child or young person to apply to the Criminal Injuries Authority for compensation. In the absence of a satisfactory outcome to criminal proceedings, this process can serve as an official validation of the abuse taking place. As with a criminal trial, it needs to be explained to the child or young person that applying for compensation involves risk, in that the application may not be successful.

**How it happened**
It is helpful for the child or young person to understand the processes that the abuser went through in making the decision to sexually abuse, and the manipulation that ensued. If it can be seen that the abuser’s decision to abuse has a history that the child or young person was not part of, and for the most part not aware of, then this will help break down the his or her sense of feeling responsible. It may be helpful to discuss Finkelhor’s (1984) Four Pre-Conditions to Sexual Abusing, perhaps in more simple terms of being the ‘Four Steps To Committing Sexual Abuse’ – 1. Wanting to do it; 2. Thinking it’s OK to do it; 3. Finding an opportunity to do it; 4. Getting the child or young person to go along with it. The detail and complexity of the explanations will of course have to vary in accordance with the child or young person’s age and understanding, particularly in relation to the sexual content. Some young people may wish to discuss the sexual motivations of the abuser.

**Why it happened**
In simple terms, the abuse happened because the abuser was present with the motivation and desire to abuse. The child or young person was targeted purposefully by the abuser. If the abuser had chosen not to abuse, then it would not have happened. It may also be helpful to discuss some of the contextual issues which have led to the prevalence of sexual abuse in our society.

**Understanding gender myths and oppression**
The sexual abuse is likely to have an impact on how the child or young person feels about himself as a boy or herself as a girl. The abuse will likely be experienced as an assault on his or her ‘masculinity’ or femininity’ and sexuality. Boys who have been abused may fear that they are gay, or that will become abusers; girls may fear that their femininity has been destroyed or damaged, and turn inwards against themselves, and may feel that the only way they can relate to men is through their bodies. It is important to explore myths and false beliefs about gender and sexuality, as they may exacerbate significantly the impact of the abuse, and serve as a vehicle to prolong and precipitate that impact into the child or young person’s day-to-day living experiences. These issues form the centre of a narrative approach, which helps the child or young person to externalise many of the issues which are causing concern.

**Memories, flashbacks and fears**
Children and young people who have been sexually abused may be prone to an oscillation of flooding (flashbacks) and constriction (blocking) of memory, leading to dissociative states. This usually happens when memories of the trauma have been repressed so that they are not generally accessed by the conscious mind. Subconscious memories invade the conscious mind in a fragmented sense. Sounds, sights, tastes, smells and touch can transport the child or young person back in their mind, to their experience of being sexually abused; often they have little control over this, and often have little understanding of why or how these thoughts and feelings can be triggered. The thoughts and feelings can be extremely powerful, and devastating. The child or young person will need some short term help, in coping with the immediate impact of flashbacks, and further help in trying to prevent flashbacks occurring in the longer term. In coping with the immediate flashbacks, cognitive behavioural techniques are helpful in building in alternative consequences and endings to the content of the flashback.

For example, one young person was helped by transforming into a ‘super hero’ who was able to interrupt the abusive process and take control saying ‘Stop, now that I have told, you cannot do this to me anymore!’. Other scenarios could involve interruption by police or parents and so on. In order to establish a meaningful interruption, the child or young person has to be engaged in describing the details of the flashback, which in itself will help to limit its intensity, by confronting the details in the conscious mind. Again the issues about feeling safe are very important here, and it is likely that this work can only be done when trust and safety has been adequately established within the therapeutic process. These techniques are described more fully by Deblinger and Heflin (1996), also helpful, are techniques described by Wasserman (1998).

The longer term problem of flashbacks is likely to be alleviated by the whole process of the therapeutic work being undertaken. A crucial aim of this work would be to assist the child or young person in becoming able to confront and fully comprehend the details and circumstances of his or her abuse, and re-integrate visual images, physical sensations and physiological responses – tastes, sounds, sights, smells, feelings – into their conscious mind. This would allow the child or young person to become able to ground themselves and distinguish past from present, and through being encouraged to access and develop personal competencies, become empowered towards taking control and rebuilding his or her life.

**Anger and feelings**
Throughout many aspects of the therapeutic work, the child or young person is likely to require support and guidance in managing anger and in expressing feelings and emotion. It is important for the child or young person to find ways to express emotions and feelings constructively. Sometimes this may be a high aspiration, as taking control can be very challenging and difficult to achieve. Feelings, thoughts and anger need to be explored and discussed as much as possible, in a search for appropriate expression and solutions. The child or young person will need to know that it is important to be in touch with how their actions may affect other people, and may sometimes alienate potential sources of help. Key people in the child or young person’s life will need to be helped to have understanding about some of these processes, and how best to be able to respond and provide appropriate support. For the child or young person, expression of feelings, which are quite often very powerful, is an essential part of the telling of the story, and may sometimes be the only medium through which he or she feels able to communicate.

**Sex and sexuality education and knowledge**
It is important to establish for the child or young person, an age-appropriate level of understanding of sexual knowledge, and an ability to be able to discuss his or her own sexuality. In helping young people understand issues about sexuality and sexual behaviour, it is important to have clearly stated values that take a holistic view of sexuality. Children and young people should be encouraged to understand that sexual behaviour is not just about physical or genital contact, but includes physical, mental, emotional, individual, social, cultural religious and political components, and that it is not necessary to have sex in order to express sexuality. In discussing these issues, it is important to challenge oppression, misinformation and stereotyping.

**Physical pleasure**
The experience of physical pleasure whilst being sexually abused can quite often be one of the child or young person’s most deeply held anxieties, and can be a significant cause and rationale for feeling guilty and thereby responsible for the abuse. It can also cause considerable fears about sexuality and future sexual motivations. The abuser may well have made reference to the child or young person’s physical response to the abuse as a calculated means of gaining simultaneously, their ‘co-operation’ and silencing. It is essential for the practitioner to discuss this aspect of the abuse with the child or young person. Sometimes the fears may be so great, that the child or young person will avoid or resist their discussion. It is also a potential source of great relief for the child or young person to have this aspect of the abuse analysed and explained in terms of anatomy and physiology; how the human body responds in terms of nerve cells and biological responses to genital touching and intercourse, and how it is very hard for these experiences not to encounter pleasurable physical sensations.

**Fears of abusing others**
The fear of abusing others is another issue which may not, through fear and anxiety, be directly raised by the child or young person. As most abusers are male, and because of the oppressive social construction of masculine sexuality and sexual behaviour, this is more likely to be a problem for boys and young men, than for girls and young women, but not exclusively. Some young women, who have been sexually abused, have significant fears about the harm they may do to their own children, others may have powerful feelings of wishing to seek revenge. It is important to identify with the child or young person whether or not there are any of these concerns present, and to make the point strongly, clearly and firmly, that most people who have been sexually abused, do not sexually abuse others.

**Friendships and peer relations**
The child or young person may have significant fears about how their close friends and acquaintances may react to finding out about the sexual abuse. The child or young person is best advised to be selective in who he or she tells about being sexually abused. Sometimes it may be helpful to assist the child or young person in constructing a cover story, which can adequately explain any visible changes in his or her circumstances. Sometimes, close friends can be an essential source of help and support. The child or young person should be encouraged to discuss and plan out who they may wish to tell about the abuse, and be assisted in speculating what their reaction might be, and importantly, in assessing how well a confidence may be maintained. The child or young person will need to know, sensitively, that the information they may give may in itself be very distressing and difficult for their friend to manage, and that this person may have a need for help and support from somebody else.

**General support**
Through the provision of the therapeutic work, the child or young person will be receiving general on-going support, which whilst working through specifically identified topics, will also involve the practitioner in the ups and downs of his or her daily life. Space should be provided within each session, for discussion of day-to-day problems, and their possible solutions. This space should also allow the sharing and celebration of day-to-day achievements and successes. Throughout the work, the child or young person should be nurtured into positive thinking, in a manner which builds persistently on self-esteem and personal competencies, and gives a clear vision of being able to heal and to move on.