

Supporting
someone who
has experienced
sexual violence:

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS

**RAPE
CRISIS
SCOTLAND**



- ¹*When we are talking about 'your child' in this booklet we are assuming they could now be an adult. Parent/carers' responsibilities, the law and other aspects vary depending on whether someone is under 16; 16-18; or over 18; and other factors such as whether a young person is in care; there are mental health issues or learning disability and so on. The **RCS Helpline** can give you information relevant to your child's age and situation.*
- ²*You may hear sexual violence being called different things such as sexual abuse, rape, sexual exploitation.*
- ³*RCS calls someone who has experienced any form of sexual violence a 'survivor'. So we use this word rather than 'victim' in this booklet.*

Supporting your daughter/son

This booklet is for any parent/carer whose child¹ has experienced any form of sexual violence². It gives information about sexual violence; how it might affect your child; and how you can help them while taking care of yourself too.

Much depends on the circumstances of the abuse, the age of your child; whether they are an adult or teenager or child or baby; whether the perpetrator is an adult or teenager; a stranger, someone your child knows, and/or a family member. Your 'child' may be an adult and telling you about an experience that happened recently or a very long time ago. They may need medical care or help from the law, but mostly they will need comfort, understanding and support. You may also need legal or other help or advice depending on the circumstances.

If your child experiences sexual violence, they might not tell you. For example, teenagers often confide in their friends rather than their parents. If they are very young they may not be able to tell you. So you may have found out about the sexual violence a long time after it happened or through some other source such as a teacher or another relative and not from your child.

Although the circumstances of the sexual violence and your child may be very different, parents tend to feel similar things: often strong feelings of guilt, responsibility, anger and grief connected to not having been able to protect their child. It can be all the more distressing if the perpetrator³ is someone close to you such as your partner or other family member. This leaflet covers some of these aspects and gives some pointers (but these depend on your child's age and other factors).

It is difficult to cover all the issues in one booklet like this. Staff on the **RCS Helpline** can give you information and support relevant to the situation; they can support parents as well as survivors from age 13; and they can tell you about other services which can help. ChildLine offers support and information to children under 13 years old on **0800 1111** or at **www.childline.org.uk**. There are other contacts at the end of the booklet.

Note

*All matters are confidential within RCS unless a child or young person is at risk. So, if you contact the **RCS Helpline** or a local centre, we have a duty of care to act on any child protection concerns if we have the information to do so.*

If you know that a child or young person is being abused or is at risk of serious harm you should take action. You may be concerned about your own child or another child or young person, for example in your family or your child's school.

If a child is at immediate risk you should contact the police on 999. Depending on the urgency of the situation you can contact police, social work, your GP, the local children's hospital or emergency department.

If your child has been recently raped or sexually assaulted they may need medical attention, for example in case of injury, sexually transmitted infection or, for young women, pregnancy testing.

Agencies work together to protect children. This may vary depending on whether your child is under 16; or 16-18; and/or their situation. When you report a concern to an organisation such as the police or social work, they will gather information about risks to any children. The police also assess whether a crime has been committed and gather evidence. If a child is under 16 there will be child protection concerns if the perpetrator has regular contact with them or other children.

*Depending on the age of a child over 16 and their circumstances, it is their choice whether or not to report the sexual violence to the police. But if your child was abused by a person in a position of trust such as a teacher or someone who has regular contact with children, you may be concerned about what might happen to other children. If so, and your child does not want to report, then you can still pass the name of the perpetrator to the police or social services anonymously. The **RCS Helpline** can help you to do this or can pass on this information for you.*

Some background information

Survivors of sexual violence are often traumatised by the experience, whether it happened:

- Once, occasionally or often
- In adulthood or childhood
- With one or several or different perpetrators at different times
- Recently or many years ago

It can be hard for parents/carers to understand or know how to respond to the strong feelings and reactions which such trauma can cause, or how to help. And parents/carers may also feel shocked, horrified and angry themselves. Parents of children who have experienced sexual violence and who are under age 16 may be responsible for what happens next, for example, whether the school is told, reporting to the police, consenting to forensic examinations, and finding support for a young person. It can be hard to get the balance right: to help your child without taking away control and/or speaking for them.

Many parents feel guilt or blame for not stopping the violence, even if they were not around. Finding out that your child has been raped or sexually assaulted is likely to be frightening and distressing, which can make you want to avoid talking about or approaching it. Often parents feel guilty about having these feelings. But it is natural to have them. Although it was your child who was abused, hearing about abuse, especially from or about someone you love, is traumatic. Being affected by what you hear can lead to you experiencing some of the same after effects as the survivor, sometimes called 'secondary' or 'vicarious trauma'.

Whether the sexual violence is still happening or happened in the past, you can be a vital support. It is possible for your child to heal from the experience. Having support, feeling safe, and time all make a big difference. There are things that you can do to help with this. It is also vital to look after yourself too.

Some basics

You may experience some of the same emotions and reactions as your child when you find out about the sexual violence including:

- Shock
- Anger and grief
- Guilt and shame
- Denial and confusion
- Wanting justice for what has happened (even if your child does not want to contact the police or tell anyone about the abuse)
- Not wanting to speak about it and not wanting your child to report to the police (you may think that your child should put it out of their mind and try to 'get over it')
- Feeling angry towards or confused about your child because they have disrupted the family

These feelings and reactions are common and it is important that you too can access support.

Parents/carers can often feel helpless. But think about the times in your own life when you have faced some sort of crisis or upset, and remember what helped you most then. It probably wasn't any one thing - but simply knowing that the people close to you believed you, were on your side, and wanted to see you through. That is how you can help now.

Your response has to be suitable for your child's age, but you can be a good support if you:

- Listen
- Accept
- Are patient
- Take the lead from your child - it is important for them to feel in control
- Don't try to push your child into making decisions such as reporting to the police if they don't want to
- Support your child if they do want to report to the police
- Avoid asking intrusive questions about the abuse
- Try to create a safe space for your child to talk. If they don't feel they can talk freely to you (often they'll be worried about the impact on those they love) try not to take it personally. Try to find them other sources of support which they can trust
- Learn about sexual violence and its effects
- Learn about ways of coping with these effects
- Avoid feeling responsible or trying to fix things; it may be outwith your control to fix things
- Ask your child what they need from you
- Look after yourself too

Depending on their age and other circumstances a child might:

- Want to talk about the sexual violence
- Not want to talk about it
- Want to talk to someone else but not you
- Be angry at you for not protecting them
- Be angry if you try to remove the perpetrator (or its context such as social media) from their life

These are all common reactions.

Forms of sexual violence

You may hear different words for sexual violence such as:

- Rape
- Sexual assault (which can include unwanted touching or kissing or being forced to perform or watch sexual acts)
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Sexual harassment at work or elsewhere (this could include posting sexual images of someone on social media)
- Stalking
- Forced marriage
- Female genital mutilation (FGM)
- Commercial sexual exploitation (such as prostitution; pornography; lap dancing; trafficking)
- So called 'honour-based' violence

Sexual violence is common. Anyone can experience it.

If someone is harmed in this way, it is not their fault. It is always the responsibility of the person who harmed them (the perpetrator). Sexual violence does not 'just happen'. A person commits sexual violence because, at some level, they decide to do so. They had a choice about what they did.

This person (or people) may have been a complete stranger. But they are more likely to be someone known to a survivor such as a family member, a trusted adult, a friend or boy/girlfriend, or some other acquaintance. It is likely that, in these circumstances, you will know the perpetrator too, and that you will also feel betrayed.

Although there are different forms of sexual violence, the effects are similar because the experience is frightening, shocking and difficult to cope with. This

is partly because of the abuse itself. But it is also because there may be other factors which make a distressing or frightening experience much worse. There may be unique stresses, threats or barriers which make it difficult for your child to tell anyone what happened, to ask for help, and to be safe from further abuse. For example:

- The perpetrator of the violence may be a close family member, a parent's partner, a member of the community (in the widest sense including area, friendship group, youth or sports club, religious group and so on), a teacher - and have some kind of hold over your child or a presence in their life and your life too
- This person may be very powerful - perpetrators can often control and silence young people. They are also good at hiding what is going on. They may also have control over you in some way, and may have 'groomed' you or your wider family as well
- The perpetrator may have threatened to harm your child (and you) if they say anything
- This could include threatening to 'out' their sexual orientation or sexual behaviour (for example sharing sexual images) to friends or family
- Even if a survivor does tell someone what happened they may not be believed. It is still common for people to think that the survivor is to blame for what happened. Your child may believe that too (especially if the perpetrator has told them that they are). You may struggle with your own beliefs about responsibility and who is to blame. Sometimes parents feel doubt or disbelief. It is understandable that you do not want to believe something like this could have happened to your child, although it is not helpful to express such feelings to your child. Instead, discuss these feelings with a professional, for example with the **RCS Helpline**, so you can explore them and also find out more about sexual violence
- Your child may be a baby or very young, and may not know that what has happened is abuse. A child may know that it was wrong on some level but may not have the language to tell you what happened

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- If your child is very young, you may suspect abuse from their behaviour; their physical health; or because of some other factor, for example a member of the family may be known to be abusive towards children. You have a responsibility to make your child safe and you must seek support and advice to do this. You can contact the **RCS Helpline** which can support you to report to social work or the police
 - The NSPCC can also support you if you are worried about your child's safety or think they may have experienced abuse. The NSPCC has helpful information about speaking to younger children called the 'underwear rule'. NSPCC suggests that PANTS is an easy way for you to explain the underwear rule to your child:
 - **P**rivates are private
 - **A**lways remember your body belongs to you
 - **N**o means no
 - **T**alk about secrets that upset you
 - **S**peak up, someone can help

See: www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/underwear-rule-schools-teaching-resources

Concerns for parents/carers

Parents/carers who contact the **RCS Helpline** mention similar issues. It may help you to know what they are because they are common responses:

- Not understanding why a child or young person delayed saying anything or said nothing at all
- Feelings of guilt because they did not know/did not protect their child
- Feelings of anger on behalf of the child or even at the child (because of a child's behaviour and reactions)
- Losing their faith in their abilities as a parent or to judge others
- Feeling as if they are not in control (particularly if a child is 18 or over and living independently)
- Worry that their child may be removed from the family home because of child protection concerns

Survivors often think that they somehow caused the abuse, and that, had they done something or behaved differently, or been somewhere else, it would not have happened. Likewise, parents often have strong feelings such as guilt, shame, helplessness and anger. They may think that they could have done more to protect their child, or that they should have known about or prevented the abuse.

Sometimes parents themselves have experienced sexual violence, as an adult or a child. They may feel even more guilty - that they should have noticed or known the signs; or that they are to blame (that because of their own experience they did not parent their child correctly or tried so hard to make sure the same thing did not happen again). But, the only person who is responsible for the abuse is the person who perpetrated it.

Many parents do not know that their child has experienced sexual violence. When they find out, they feel as if they should have known. But it is worth asking yourself how you could have known?

Even if there were signs that something was wrong, these signs may have been isolated and not in a context. It may only be in hindsight that you can see a pattern.

Your child may have been 'groomed'. For example the perpetrator may have befriended them, treated them as special, and encouraged them to view you as controlling and spoiling their fun. By the time a young person realises what is going on they may be too frightened to resist or to speak up.

You may have suspected that sexual violence was happening. If it happened in the context of domestic abuse, you may have felt unable to protect your child. Everyone has a right to life free of abuse, organisations like RCS can work with you to help keep yourself and your child safe from any ongoing risks.

There is more information about sexual violence, including information for parents and carers about children and online abuse at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help/online-safety

How sexual violence can affect survivors

Everyone's experience of sexual violence is different. It also affects people in different ways. Much depends on what happened; when it happened (for example in childhood or adulthood); the help someone gets at the time; and the other circumstances of their life.

Some common effects of sexual violence and the trauma which can result are:

- Fear and shock
- Pain and injury
- Feeling ashamed, guilty and responsible for the abuse
- Feeling trapped, silenced, lonely and powerless
- Short and long-term physical and mental health problems
- Pregnancy (girls/women) and infections
- Bedwetting, sleep disturbance, nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks, feeling disconnected
- Anxiety, anger, depression, aggression

- Unhealthy ways of coping such as risk taking; eating too much or too little; drinking too much alcohol; or taking too many over-the-counter or illegal drugs; self-harming and suicidal thoughts

These effects can be disruptive within a household and to relationships. They can last for a long time, even after there is no immediate threat. Sometimes, mental and physical health problems emerge later on in life.

Whatever the effects, they are a common response to a traumatic experience. It can be difficult for parents to know what to do to support their child. There may be times when you want to intervene and stop certain behaviour. But trying to stop or take away someone's way of coping, at least in the short term, is not always helpful. This also applies to you - you will also have your own ways of coping and some may be more positive than others.

RCS has a series of self-help leaflets to help with some of these effects. They are online at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help

Look after yourself too

It can be distressing to see your child upset, frightened, hurt and/or traumatised. It is important to look after yourself too. You are likely to be more helpful, and a more effective parent/carer, if you are OK. This may include:

- Asking for help for yourself and speaking to someone else about what is happening. Organisations which support survivors of abuse are happy for parents/carers and others to phone for advice and support too. This includes the **RCS Helpline** and local Rape Crisis centres. Some centres offer phone or face-to-face support for parents/carers - singly or in groups
- Setting limits about what you can and cannot do. Remember that you are not responsible for the abuse. You cannot act on behalf of an adult child. You cannot change what has already happened
- It is important to understand what your child is going through and to make some allowances for difficult behaviour, which is probably linked to the impact of the abuse. But setting safe boundaries can be important for everyone, and

it is fine for you to say to your child that, while you support them, it is not OK for them to behave in ways that hurt you or others or for them to treat you badly. If their behaviour is causing serious problems for you or your family, you have a right to say or do something about it; that does not mean you are being unsupportive to them

- Finding an outlet for your own feelings - whether this is through sport or exercise or yoga or something else that suits you. It will not help you to simply deny your feelings (such as being upset for your child, or about the idea of them being violated). It will not help if you take your feelings out on your child
- Finding out more about abuse and its effects so you can understand what is going on and why your child is reacting the way they are
- Taking time for yourself, your own interests and the things that you enjoy
- RCS has a useful leaflet about coping after sexual violence. It suggests some helpful techniques which may be useful both for you and for your child. You can find this at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help

Some ways you can help

There is a lot you can do to support your child. This will vary according to their age. For example:

- Reassure your child that they are right to talk about what happened
- Help them to understand that they are not to blame for what happened; the perpetrator is always to blame
- Tell them about the law, the age of consent in Scotland is 16 years
- Explain what can happen if the police and legal system are involved. RCS has a helpful DVD about the process for adult survivors at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG32uX2YFWQ
Note that the process might vary for young people
- Explain that young people can get special help to give evidence if a case goes to court, for example giving evidence by TV link
- Reassure them that you will support them
- Explain that you may need to tell other people (depending on the situation)

You cannot put yourself into your child's shoes. Even if you have experienced sexual violence too, your reactions, responses and circumstances are different. What works or worked for you will not necessarily work for them.

It can be hard to stand back because you care about your child, and you may be frightened for them. But, if your child is an adult, it is up to them to decide whether or not to accept your help or advice. For an older teenager, you will be more helpful if you encourage rather than take over. Your help or advice also has to come at the right time for them. It is very important for your child to feel that they have some control. This is because, when people experience sexual violence, they have control taken away from them.

It is useful to find out the legal position. You may need to get legal advice or find out about what happens to a child or young person who has to go through a court process so that you can explain it to them. You can contact the **RCS Helpline** or the Scottish Women's Rights Centre or the Scottish Child Law Centre (see end) for more information.

Manage your own strong feelings and reactions safely

- Don't take things into your own hands such as confronting the perpetrator, threatening them or assaulting them. This is unhelpful, unsafe and could also be criminal
- You may feel that you want justice for your child. But depending on their age, if they are over 16/18/adults¹, your role is likely to be to stand back and respect what they decide to do. They are their own person. It's important that they can set their own boundaries in order to take back control

Listen and believe

- Listen to your child. Give them time to talk. It can be tempting to tell them about your own experiences. Try not to do that. They need you to listen to them for now
- Good or 'active' listening means you help someone to develop their own thoughts

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- Most of us think we are better at listening than we actually are. Show, and let your child know, that you have heard what they said
 - Become comfortable with silence. A child may be thinking about how or whether to say something. They may not want to talk. You don't need to jump in to fill silences because you think you should or because it makes you feel uncomfortable
 - Many children want to protect their parents from hearing about abuse, or are worried about how their parent will respond; or if the parent will disapprove of their sexual orientation or behaviour; or take over; or that it will get a parent into some sort of trouble. So they may not want to tell you much, they may be more comfortable speaking to someone outside the family.
 - Avoid loaded questions such as 'you could have done such and such couldn't you?' or 'could you not have told me about this at the time?'
 - Questions are not always helpful. You don't need to know the details of what happened in order to help someone. Also, it may 're-traumatise' someone to have to go over it/try to remember it/and say the words
 - Accept and believe what your child says. Perpetrators often tell survivors that no-one will believe them. It is hard for people, especially young people, to talk about abuse. Imagine what it must be like to pluck up the courage to talk about it. Sometimes, the nature and level of the abuse are 'unbelievable' in the sense of the lengths to which some perpetrators go to harm survivors, blame survivors and cover up their actions. You may not fully believe what you are hearing or you may believe some things that are not true about sexual violence (for example that people are to blame if they drink too much or dress in a certain way)
 - Don't judge your child's story or be surprised if what they tell you does not fully add up. They may not tell you everything. They may not remember everything that happened, especially if it was a long time ago. Memory is also affected by trauma or ill-health or shock or fear. They may have been asleep at the time, or unconscious, or very young

- If your child talks to you about sexual violence, it is good to tell them how brave they are for telling you, rather than ask why they never told you before
- If your child is very young, you may want to find specialist support to help them express what has happened. Trained professionals, such as child psychologists, have unobtrusive ways of working with young children, using different methods such as arts, storytelling, role-play with toys and so on to help them describe what has happened or how they are feeling

Accept how your child reacts

- However your child reacts to abuse, accept and try to understand their reaction. For example, depending on their age, some people may respond to trauma by appearing very calm; others may cry, be angry or 'shut down'. Others may drink too much alcohol, overeat, not leave the house, not be able to get out of bed and so on. There is no one way to react - everyone is different. You may not find some of these reactions very likeable or acceptable
- Rather than questioning what your child does or did in order to cope with the sexual violence, accept that they did and do what seems natural to them. For example, if someone raped your adult child, self-protection may have meant not 'fighting back' as some people might think they should have been able to do. 'Freezing' is a natural survival response to danger (other survival responses are to run away or to fight). The brain takes over - people don't choose how they will react; it is automatic
- Remember that your child is not responsible for abuse. If your child blames themselves, it may help if you say to them that it is not their fault, that the perpetrator had a choice about how he acted
- Reassure them that they are not to blame for the abuse, and that there are people who want to help

Practical ways in which you may be able to help

- Be consistent. If you offer support to a your child do what you say you will do and be how you say you will be

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- Depending on their age, try to find out what your child needs from you, if anything. Don't assume what they want or need. Ask 'what can I do to help now? Just let them know that you are there for them
 - Get (depending on their age) or encourage your child to get help if you think they need this. This could include medical attention or support from a local Rape Crisis centre. The **RCS Helpline** provides phone and email support to anyone over 13 (and ChildLine is there for anyone under 13 and up to 19)
 - If your child has panic attacks or flashbacks or nightmares or is self-harming or talking about suicide, it is useful to find out more about these symptoms of trauma. The Rape Crisis Scotland website has a series of self-help leaflets with practical techniques. There are leaflets on:
 - **Anger**
 - **Coping after sexual violence**
 - **Dissociation**
 - **Flashbacks**
 - **Healing from sexual violence**
 - **Nightmares and sleeping problems**
 - **Panic attacks**
 - **Relationships**
 - **Self-harm**
 - **Sexual health**
 - **Suicidal thoughts/feelings**
 - **Trauma**
 - You can find them at www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/help. Also tell your child (depending on their age) about them
 - You may be frightened if a young person is self-harming, for example, cutting themselves. There is more information about self-harm in our leaflet. Self-harming is a way of coping. It is not a suicide attempt and most people who cut themselves have no intention of committing suicide

- Some people report sexual violence to the police; others do not. It is important to respect your child's choice in this (depending on their age). But if they are under 16 parents/carers are responsible for protecting their child and reporting to the police. If they are 16-18 then parents would report with their child's agreement unless the perpetrator is a person in a position of trust or you are aware that other children may be at risk. If someone, adult or child, does want to report, you may be able to help by going with them. You can also help by supporting them while they attend appointments, take notes at appointments or help with transport. You may also be able to give evidence to support their case
- Your child may not find it easy to cope with everyday life, for example going to school, college or staying in their friendship group or social media. You can encourage, as is suitable, rather than put pressure on them
- They may not want to spend all (or any) of their time thinking or talking about the abuse. They may feel lonely at times. Think about nice things which you could do together, or which you could encourage them to do for themselves or with others. This could include watching TV together or other simple pleasures or treats which nurture them and make them feel cared for. These do not need to cost money and they can help your child feel better about themselves and also see that they are worth caring for
- Respect your child's privacy. They may or may not want other people to know what has happened. You may want to keep it secret for your own reasons, for example, you may feel shame. But, if a child is at risk then you should protect them and that may mean telling others and asking for help. For older and adult children, it is best if you can take the lead from them because secrecy may reinforce their feelings of shame and humiliation; forced secrecy may have been a significant element of the abuse



Rape Crisis Scotland National Helpline

Confidential support by phone and email

08088 01 03 02 (every day 6pm to midnight)

www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk

support@rapecrisisScotland.org.uk

The **RCS Helpline** offers free and confidential support and information by phone or email. It is for anyone over age 13 who has been affected by sexual violence, no matter when or how it happened. We also support friends, families and relatives. The helpline has a minicom service for Deaf or hard of hearing people. The minicom number is **0141 332 2168**. We can arrange for language interpreters for those whose first language is not English.

We can put people in touch with local Rape Crisis centres or other services for longer-term support. Many local centres have projects for young people and their friends; some centres offer one-to-one and group support for parents and other family members.

The **RCS Helpline** aims to be inclusive and welcoming to all regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership status, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, gender identity, intersex status or sexual orientation.

Other useful contacts

Scottish Women's Rights Centre

08088 010 789

Tues: 6-9pm

Wed: 1.30-4.30pm

free and confidential legal information and advice

www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk



ChildLine

0800 1111

free and confidential support to children and young people of any age by phone, email, chat

www.childline.org.uk

Calls to ChildLine are free and confidential and do not appear on home phone bills; nor do calls from 3 (Three), BT Mobile, EE, O2, Orange, T Mobile, Virgin or Vodafone mobiles

NSPCC Scotland

0808 800 5000

information about child protection

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/scotland

WithScotland

information about child protection services

www.withscotland.org/public

Scottish Child Law Centre

0131 667 6333

free legal advice for and about children

Freecall under 21s

landlines: **0800 328 8970**

mobiles: **0300 3301421**

www.sclcl.org.uk