

Responding to Child Sexual Abuse during Covid-19

Victims of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation are potentially on lockdown with their abusers. Safeguarding has never been as important as it is during this crisis.

During Covid-19 restrictions, we recognise the challenges policing teams are already facing visiting family homes. Please also be mindful of the extra risk to these vulnerable children and be extra vigilant to pick up cues.

What to know:

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- 67% of victims of Child Sexual Abuse have been abused by a close relative.
 - Children are often groomed to believe that they should never tell anyone about the abuse they are victim to.
 - During lockdown, the protective factors around a child may have been removed and children may have less opportunities to disclose abuse.
 - Exploitation and abuse can also happen online. With more children relying on their device, there is an increased chance for an abuser to access a victim through online means.
 - Witnessing domestic abuse is child abuse.

What to look for:

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- The behaviour of a child or young person around particular individuals is guarded. A child may seem particularly nervous or fearful.
 - A child or young person may refuse to engage with you entirely.
 - A perpetrator may make it impossible for you to engage with a child, establishing excuses and intervening in any interaction.
 - Signs of physical abuse or self-harm including burns, bruises, cuts, limping and facial expressions showing possible physical pain.
 - Sudden unexplained changes of mood during interaction.
 - Indicators of pregnancy.
 - Signs of 'regressive' behaviour e.g. bedwetting.
 - Parental concerns around a child's online activity and interactions.
 - An extreme response to routine calls from adults with children in the house. This may manifest in aggression or threat.

In responding to child abuse concerns:

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- Victims may not always look 'vulnerable' - stay curious and look beyond the obvious.
 - Make sure you speak to the child away from any other adults in the house.
 - Listen and believe what the child is telling you and ensure their voice is central to your next steps.
 - Reassure the child, tell them it is not their fault and that you will take what they are saying seriously.
 - Explain what you will do next and that you will keep them informed.
 - If you have any concerns about a child, make a safeguarding referral through your normal routes.
 - For call-outs relating to domestic abuse, it is essential to check on the welfare of every child in the house, including those who are in bedrooms or who are asleep.
 - A child should never be left if it is assessed as unsafe to do so and the victim and child should always be offered safe accommodation through use of local domestic abuse refuges.