



The victim and survivor engagement guide

A practical toolkit for working with survivors on CSAE investigations

Child Sexual
Exploitation
Taskforce

 **NAPAC**
The National Association for
People Abused in Childhood

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How to use this guide

This guide acts as a quick reference point for police officers who are supporting and/or interacting with victims and survivors of abuse in childhood throughout the lifecycle of a child sexual abuse and/or exploitation investigation, both recent and non-recent.

It provides simple guidance on how best to support the victim or survivor at each stage of the investigation.

Pages 19, 20 and 21 provide advice specifically tailored to supporting child victims or survivors.

Each section of the guide corresponds to an investigative stage, giving practical suggestions and a conversation guide that will benefit both survivor and officer wellbeing.

In properly implementing these principles, you can reduce the likelihood of retraumatisation and facilitate a more positive, empowering experience with criminal justice.

This guide is based on data from UK police forces and NAPAC's Redefining Justice paper – a study of over 46,000 conversations with survivors about their experiences of the justice system. It was created by the government's Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce. Led by the Hydrant Programme, and supported by TOEX, the VKPP, and select third sector partners, the CSE Taskforce focuses on enhancing the policing response to child sexual exploitation and abuse.



The core principals of support

These principles should be present at every stage of the investigation. They are non-negotiables that will help build appropriate, productive relationships between the victim or survivor and the officer, safeguarding both parties.

Begin with belief

For many survivors, feeling believed by the police is as important as a formal criminal justice outcome. If you can convey belief in an appropriate, empathetic manner, that is a hugely positive outcome in of itself. This is about starting from a place of belief, so that the survivor feels supported and safe. Any investigation which follows is still undertaken with an open mind and adherence to the national crime recording standards.

“ ”

Try using language like:

"Thank you for trusting me with this, I believe you."

"I know it must have taken a lot of strength to say that, and I just want to say thank you for sharing this, and I believe you."

"It can't be easy to speak up, but be assured that you are believed, and I'll do all I can to support you through this process."

Offer information and choice

As a victim or survivor of childhood abuse, choice and agency was taken away from them.

You can help them regain some of that agency and make empowered, informed choices as they proceed through the investigation.

At a practical level this looks like:

- Talking through their options in detail and explaining what the next steps in the process look like, so they are not surprised or caught unaware.
- Allowing extra time for them to make their decision and accepting they may not be able/want to make a decision 'in the moment'.
- Understanding that the victim or survivor may not wish or be able to tell you everything.
- Making considered adjustments based on their circumstances and discussing what will make them feel most comfortable – for example, might they need a translator, or might they want a friend present when interacting with the police?
- Signposting to appropriate support services.

Build trust through transparency

Trust and transparency are integral to fostering an appropriate relationship that prioritises the outcomes victims and survivors want to achieve.

In practice this means:

- Being open and honest about the investigative process and what it entails, including timelines and delays.
- Communicating empathetically and acting as an advocate and an ally throughout the investigation.
- Consistency - when you commit to doing something, you do your best to honour that commitment. Not keeping to time slots or agreed actions is a quick path to distrust and disengagement.



Ensuring accessibility

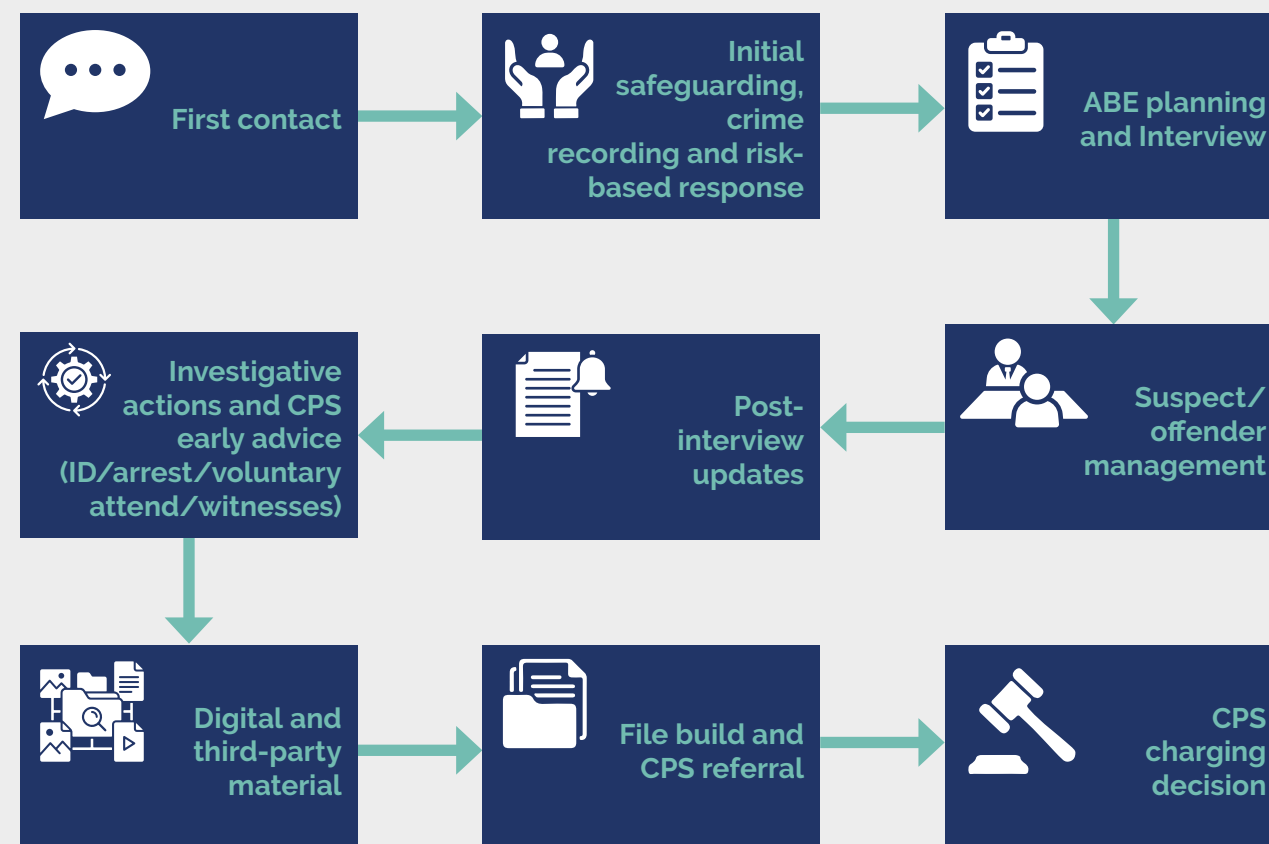
For professionals working within justice contexts, accessibility determines whether victims and survivors can meaningfully participate in processes that directly affect their preferred outcomes and access to justice

Victims and survivors bring a wide range of experiences and needs. These may include physical disability, chronic illness, sensory sensitivities, neurodivergence, literacy considerations or language differences.

When accessibility is built in from the outset engagement becomes possible rather than conditional. It also strengthens trust and reinforces the legitimacy of institutional processes.

Conversations about access should begin early and be framed as routine professional practice rather than a special request.

The pathway map



First contact



This section gives an overview of what to be aware of when a victim or survivor of non-recent child abuse, including sexual abuse or exploitation, first contacts the police. It is crucial that their initial experience communicating with a police officer is positive and safe. If not, they may not engage with or trust the police again.

How survivors may feel or behave

- **Trauma responses**, like 'fight or flight' mode. Fear and adrenaline can cause shortness of breath, heart palpitations and emotional spikes.
- **Shutdown**. They may withdraw mid-conversation because they are unable to continue or feel they have overshared.
- **Loss of control**. Many survivors have told NAPAC that the act of reporting is so frightening because they lose control of their 'secret', and how others perceive them.

What you can do to support

- **Be warm and empathetic**, avoiding neutral responses that can appear as disbelief.
- **Being authentic and making the survivor feel believed**. For many, the simple acknowledgment of their experience by a police officer can be as powerful as a formal legal outcome.
- Where possible, **offer a quiet place** to sit and wait, with access to water and a bathroom.
- Offer them the opportunity to **take a break** when needed, or to resume the conversation another time.
- **Explain their right to have someone with them** (friend, advocate, ISVA). This is known as a victim needs assessment (VNA). A VNA should be conducted in consultation with the victim or survivor at every stage of the investigation.
- Give a **calm, transparent explanation** of what is likely to happen next.
- **Agree** on how and when they would like to be contacted as the case progresses, with the option to disengage and re-engage if needed.
- **Signposting to support**, including options independent of policing.



Conversation Guide

"Thank you for trusting me with this, you are not alone. I'm here to support you and to listen. You're in control of what you share today, and we can go at your pace, and take a break whenever you might need. Does that sound okay to you?"

"Thank you for telling me this, I know it can't be easy. I am here to listen and to support you, so just let me know if there's anything you need, or if you'd like to take a break."

Initial safeguarding, crime recording and risk-based response



How survivors may feel or behave

- At this stage victims and survivors describe significant fear and doubt, particularly around the consequences of their disclosure becoming 'official'.
- Anxiety at perpetrators being contacted or 'finding out' is common, especially if escalation or retaliation is possible.

What you can do to support

- Explain any safeguarding steps and why they are happening.
- Be transparent about confidentiality and information sharing.
- Check immediate practical needs (housing, safety, health, risk to children). It can help to return to these questions later in the conversation to confirm and expand answers.
- Signpost to specialist support such as ISVAs or support services.



Conversation Guide

"I'm going to ask some questions to make sure you're safe and to understand what support might help right now. Some of these questions may feel personal, but you can tell me if you'd rather not answer something yet".

"I'll explain why I'm asking, and we'll take it slowly. I understand this can be a lot to process, so if you need to take a break, or you want me to explain anything again, please do ask."

Handover of case to a specialist officer or another force

It is also worth noting that handover between different staff or forces can be a major point of attrition for victims and survivors if they have not been forewarned this may happen. They must be consulted and communicated with if they are to have a new main point of contact.

It can be extremely confusing and triggering for a case to be passed to someone else without any introduction, explanation or choice, often leading to disengagement from the reporting process.

How survivors may feel or behave

- Unsettled or anxious. It may feel like a loss of stability just as trust was beginning to form, especially if they have already shared difficult information.
- Worried about having to repeat themselves. They may fear having to explain what happened again, or that important details will be lost in the transfer.
- Unsure, disappointed, or disheartened. The move may feel like a setback, make the process seem more complicated, or raise concerns about whether they will still be taken seriously.



Conversation Guide

"I need to let you know that, because of where this happened another police force will need to take this case forward. I understand that may feel unsettling, especially having already started to speak about what happened".

"I will explain what this means, what will happen next, and who will be in contact. We will do this as clearly and carefully as possible, and you can ask questions at any point. If you need me to pause or go over anything again, please do say."

ABE planning and interview



Evidence shows the achieving best evidence (ABE) interview remains both an important step in building a case and a significant point of attrition for the victim or survivor. Preparation and transparency are central to ensuring a safe experience.

How survivors may feel or behave

- Survivors have spoken of reluctance to engage with an ABE interview as their memory is fragmented or hazy and they worry they will not be believed.
- The recorded nature of the ABE interview can feel like a point of no return. There may be huge pressure to 'get it right' because it is permanent.

What you can do to support

- Be explicit about what the interview involves, particularly elements such as timing, location and duration. If it is possible to conduct the ABE interview over multiple conversations discuss this option and other accommodations.
- Discuss triggers, breaks and grounding strategies in advance. Have a pre-agreed plan for what the survivor will need if they feel overwhelmed.
- Reassurance is key. Let them know that memory gaps, uncertainty and emotional responses are normal, and that these reactions do not undermine the importance or seriousness of what they are sharing.
- Avoid framing inconsistencies as credibility issues. Allow time to review and make note of any context points that might help with clarifications later.
- Explain their right to have someone with them to support, and if necessary, arrange for an ISVA/translator/mental health professional to attend.
- Signpost to support options.



Conversation Guide

"Do you feel you have everything you need to begin the formal statement? It's okay if you don't remember everything, or if things feel unclear, that's very common after trauma".

"There's no 'right' way to do this, just relay things in your own words as far as you feel comfortable. We can pause at any time and take a break or review this together, and I'm here if you need me for anything."



Suspect/Offender Management



How survivors may feel or behave

- Anxiety around community or family perception if the perpetrator is arrested.
- Fear of ostracism.
- Powerlessness as events unfold that affect them but are beyond their control.

What you can do to support

- Keep survivors informed about risk management planning and how to escalate if there is a concern.
- Explain bail conditions, restrictions or lack thereof in plain language.
- Offer guidance on personal safety planning where relevant or signpost to the relevant people to assist with this.
- Ensure the victim or survivor is kept up to date with any changes to the ongoing risk posed to them, so they aren't left in danger or unnecessarily scared.
- Signpost to support options, including those independent of police.



Conversation Guide

"There are some steps we now need to take to further the investigation. These can take time, and I will keep you updated as much or as little as you'd like".

"We can't predict how things will develop or what the outcome will be at this stage, but what you've told us is important and will be taken seriously. None of this is a reflection on whether you're believed."



Post interview updates



Many survivors have described periods of no contact as being the most difficult. Transparent, empathetic communication between policing staff and the survivor is vital.

How survivors may feel or behave

- Uncertain and doubtful that they have been believed.
- 'No update' may sound like 'no progress', creating significant frustration.

What you can do to support

- Provide regular updates at agreed intervals even when there is no progress, unless the survivor has requested otherwise.
- Be transparent about timelines and delays.
- Offer a named contact person and agree a method of contact.
- Check emotional wellbeing following the interview.
- Signpost to support.



Conversation Guide

"Between updates the work of the investigation will be ongoing. I'll stay in contact and let you know when there are developments. If you're feeling unsure or need to check in, you can contact me/xxxx and I/ they will be happy to chat things through."

Investigative actions and CPS early advice



NAPAC's **Redefining Justice** paper highlights this as a challenging stage for survivors. Legal thresholds can easily feel like judgements on credibility or character. Requests to interview family members and other people known to the survivor can be especially triggering and destabilise the survivor's support networks.

How survivors may feel or behave

- Anxiety over evidential thresholds.
- Fear that their memory will be judged.
- Reluctance or upset at requests to interview family members.

What you can do to support

- Explain decisions, next steps, and uncertainty honestly.
- Prepare survivors for possible outcomes early, including a no further action decision.
- Reinforce that justice outcomes do not equal belief or disbelief.
- Offer continued support regardless of case progress.
- Signpost to support.



Conversation Guide

"There are some steps we now need to take to investigate further. These take time. We can't predict the outcome, but what you've told us is important and has been taken seriously."

Where you can offer a choice on engaging with a relative or friend

"If possible, we would like to speak to [name of relative or other person known to the survivor]. I know this can feel intrusive, but they may be able to help the investigation, and we want the best outcome possible. Would it be okay with you if we spoke to [name]? Is there anything you would like us to know or consider?"

Where you must speak to a witness or key person

"I recognise that us speaking to [name] may be upsetting or disruptive, but in this case we must speak to them, due to [explanatory reason]. Is there anything we can do to make the situation easier for you?"



Digital and third-party material requests



How survivors may feel or behave

- Having anyone investigate your life can mimic the dynamics of abuse, particularly being unable to choose personal boundaries and experiencing a loss of control.
- Police officers and survivors alike have highlighted stress and frustration around the analysis of mobile phones and digital devices.

What you can do to support

- Clearly explain why personal records or digital data may be requested.
- Be transparent about scope, limits and timing.
- Acknowledge the emotional impact of handing over personal information and surrendering personal items.
- This stage can feel particularly intrusive, so it is important to signpost to emotional support.



Conversation Guide

"We need to review some personal records and digital information as part of the investigation. I understand this can feel invasive. I'll explain exactly what we're asking for and why, and we'll only request what is necessary. I'll do my best to answer any questions - do you have any at the moment?"

"I know this can feel intrusive, but we are only requesting what is necessary to help strengthen the case. We aren't investigating you or looking to trip you up."

File build and CPS intervention



How survivors may feel or behave

- As you prepare to refer the case to the CPS, this can feel like another point of no return for the survivor.
- Up until this point they may have shared their story with a few policing staff who they have built trust with, but the case moving to the CPS represents a leap into the unknown and subsequent fears of judgement and misrepresentation.

What you can do to support

- Reassure the survivor that their voice is central to the case narrative.
- Thank them for sticking with the process, recognise the strength and patience it has taken to get here.
- Offer opportunities to ask for clarity or add information.
- Maintain communication about progress and expected timelines; this is a good point to review how often you will be in contact and adjust arrangements if needed.
- Signpost to support.



Conversation Guide

"We're now preparing the information to have the case reviewed by the Crown Prosecution Service. Is there anything you'd like me to explain? Or is there any information you'd like to add? If there's anything you remember later, you can still tell us. Sometimes it can take time for memories to resurface."

"We'll be passing the case to the Crown Prosecution Service on [date]. I want you to know that I am still here for you if you need anything, or you have any questions. It's normal to feel apprehensive and if you need more information or additional support, please ask."

"Soon the case will be passed to the Crown Prosecution Service. They will then determine what actions they can take, including whether to charge. The CPS will make their decision based on legal and evidentiary thresholds. Whatever the CPS can do, it doesn't change that I believe what you have told me, and I appreciate how much you have trusted me."

CPS charging decision



How survivors may feel or behave

- Guilt at the prospect of their abuser going to prison, particularly if the abuser is a family member.
- Fear about having to appear in court and this area of their life becoming publicly known and scrutinised.
- Understanding technical legal terms and their implications, whatever the decision or outcome, can take time.
- Worry that they 'have not done enough'.

What you can do to support

Whatever the outcome

- Explain the decision and next steps in plain English and ask if they have any concerns.
- Offer to meet again at a later date and explain the decision.
- Signpost to support.

If there is no charge:

- Reiterate that this is not a judgment on truthfulness, it reflects legal and evidentiary thresholds.
- Reiterate that the survivor is in no way to blame for the decision and thank them again for trusting you.
- Make them aware of other legal routes or appeals such as the Victims Right to Review and civil law options including CICA.

If charged:

- Acknowledge their trust and strength
- Outline what happens next, including possible court delays



Conversation Guide

If charged:

"A decision has been made to move forward with charges. I know this may bring a mix of feelings. Is there anything you need now? We'll explain what happens next and make sure you have the right support as things progress."

If no charges are brought:

"I'm sorry to tell you that the CPS have not issued a charge. I want to explain that a decision not to charge is about legal thresholds and evidence requirements, please know that this does not mean you are not believed. What you shared was taken seriously. Support is still available to you, and we can help you access it."

"Firstly, I want to say thank you for your courage in coming forward and supporting this investigation. I'm sorry to tell you that the CPS have not issued a charge. The decision not to charge is about legal thresholds and evidence requirements and does not mean you are not believed. There is still support available if you need. Is there anything I can do for you now?"

"I know this is likely disappointing news to hear, but the CPS have not issued a charge. What you shared was taken seriously, but unfortunately, the legal and evidentiary thresholds required to issue a charge were not met. Please know that this does not mean you are not believed. Is there anything I can do or explain for you now? If you'd prefer, we can set a date to go over things in the coming days and weeks."

Disengagement from the justice process

An important witness wanting to exit the investigative process can be disappointing and frustrating, both for the survivor and for the policing staff. However, there are things that you can do to ensure a smooth and dignified disengagement, leaving the door open for the survivor to reach out again, if and when they feel ready.

Why survivors may wish to exit the process

- They may feel they have the belief and the validation they were pursuing. This can be a positive disengagement. If their main goal for reporting was to be heard and believed, and they feel they've achieved that, then you have supported a powerful and meaningful outcome.
- Competing priorities, especially for a process that can take several years. It simply may not be feasible for someone to continue with the emotional and time commitment if it is negatively impacting family or work responsibilities.
- Fear of consequences and repercussions, particularly in intrafamilial cases where the survivor can feel responsible for any negative consequences of the disclosure and investigation.

What you can do to support

- Avoid any language that implies blame or disappointment.
- Keep the door open for future contact, explaining that they are welcome to get in touch again and advising on the best way to do that.
- Acknowledge their strength in coming this far, and the difficulty of the overall process.
- Clearly explain what this means for the investigation, and what will or won't happen next.



Conversation Guide:

"I understand that it can be difficult to talk about what happened to you as a child and that this process is demanding too. I completely respect your decision not to continue to support the investigation, but I wanted to let you know that if you change your mind in the future, or think of anything you would like us to know, we are here."

"Thank you for your courage in disclosing what happened. I understand your decision not to continue but I also wanted to say that if anything changes in the future, we are here if you need, and you can reach out to us."

"You've shown so much strength in coming forward, and I hope you have felt believed and supported. I respect your decision not to continue. If anything changes in the future, I want you to know that you can get in touch with us. We are here for you."

"I completely respect your decision not to continue, and I know this process can be difficult and demanding. Now, I'll give a brief explanation on what will happen next with the case, and we can agree if and how you would like to be contacted, is that okay with you?"



What are the key differences when supporting a child victim or survivor?

Where there is a child victim or survivor at the centre of a case there are additional considerations, even if the process for investigation can be similar between recent and non-recent investigations,

This section highlights these differences and what to consider when supporting a child as a victim or survivor or witness. It can and should be used in conjunction with **the appropriate language guide**, which gives in-depth advice on eradicating victim-blaming language when communicating to and about victims and survivors of CSAE.

It is also to be used in addition to **College of Policing guidance on investigating child abuse and safeguarding children**. Ideally, officers or staff supporting child victims or survivors of CSAE will be SCAIDP accredited.

Overall communication principles

- Speak directly to the child, as well as caregivers/parents.
- Check understanding repeatedly and in different ways.
- Ensure communications are tailored to consider age, neurodiverse needs and cultural sensitivity.
- Use the right person for communication, chosen by the child where possible and appropriate. This may be an advocate or safeguarding agency partner.
- Use the right type of contact - young people may be more receptive to contact via text instead of a phone call, for example. Ask, and give choices where possible.
- Address unconscious bias, for example, prioritising or giving too much weight to a parent's narrative may obscure what a child is trying to communicate.
- Be aware of adultification versus infantilisation. Adultification disproportionately affects young black boys and girls, and infantilisation is especially common for young people with disabilities.
- Recognise trauma responses as normal and understandable.
- Understand the weight of small interactions, and the positive difference small kindnesses can make.
- Be mindful of non-verbal behaviours that indicate the child's situation. Some examples include sexualised behaviour, being very loud or very quiet, as well as the language they use (such as if they use a swear words or slang term for body parts).

Multi-agency working, S47 strategy discussions and safeguarding decisions

Safeguarding steps are typically undertaken alongside, or immediately following, initial contact, in line with Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026 and following iterations). The involvement of parents, caregivers, those with statutory responsibilities, and wider multi-agency partners—including during Section 47 strategy discussions—can increase complexity for children. This is particularly true where information must be shared and decisions are made collectively to ensure the child's safety.

How the child may feel or behave

- They may present as fearful or lacking a sense of control when discussions are taking place about them and their lives.
- Angry and confused, as they do not perceive themselves as a 'victim'. This can be particularly prevalent in cases of sexual or criminal exploitation where they have been groomed into considering themselves accountable or willing.

What you can do to support

- Wherever possible, offer the child choices about where conversations take place and who is present, supporting their sense of control and participation.
- While decision-making may ultimately sit with parents, caregivers, or professionals, ensure the child is kept informed of safeguarding processes and outcomes, including those arising from multi-agency discussions.
- Acknowledge openly that it can be frustrating to have decisions made about them, particularly in the context of safeguarding interventions and S47 enquiries.
- Clearly explain that decisions are being made to keep them safe and ensure they know who they can contact if they feel unsafe. Where appropriate, provide contact details directly to the child.
- Tailor communication and engagement to the child's age, understanding, and capacity, ensuring their voice remains central throughout.



Conversation guide

"I understand that this might feel confusing or frustrating. My role is to help keep you safe, and that means I may need to share information and speak with your parents or other professionals as part of this process. I will keep you updated about what is happening. If you have any questions, or if there's anything I can do to make things easier, please let me know. I will check in with you later today/after these discussions so you have another opportunity to talk."

SARC Attendance

SARC attendance should occur before the achieving best evidence (ABE) interview, unless there are exceptional circumstances, such as discovery during an investigation.

The priority is the child's wellbeing and safety, and SARC staff are best placed to determine that, including physical and mental health considerations. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) produces the 'Physical signs of child sexual abuse (Purple Book)' setting out details on good practice in paediatric forensic examinations, used by clinical staff at UK SARCs and around the world. They will be able to refer to that guidance to support their work. Do ask if there is anything you are unclear on, especially as the purple book was updated in 2025.

How the child may feel or behave

- Anxious at the prospect of being examined.
- Embarrassed at the nature of the examinations.
- Putting on a 'brave face' for family or any adults supporting them.
- Confusion about why they are being 'put through' this process.

What you can do to support

- Outline the process (what happens) and purpose (why those things happen) of the SARC visit to the child.
- Explain that the physical exam is to keep them safe and healthy, any evidence it might provide is secondary to their health and wellbeing. Ideally do this alongside the medical lead who will be conducting the exam, so the child gets consistent information and can see you are professionals working together to support them.
- Explain that they can ask the team more about the exam, and can ask about taking breaks too.
- Tailor the below conversation prompts accordingly to the child's age and capacity.



Conversation Guide

"If it is okay with you, we'd like to take you to see a doctor who is specially trained to look after children and make sure you're okay. They are at [location, name of hospital or centre, and town]. I'll be in a waiting room the whole time you are there, and I will meet you after and we will talk about what happens next. Is there anyone else you'd like to be there for you?"

"I understand you may feel nervous about this, that's completely normal. The doctor is here to help and to make sure you are okay, and can get any medicine you need. How do you feel?"

"If you feel ready, we're going to attend a centre where a doctor will help make sure you're okay. You're not in any trouble, and the doctor will explain everything, step by step. Is there someone you trust you would like to be with you? I will be in waiting room to meet you after. You can ask me anything, and if I don't know we can ask the doctor together."

Signposting and additional resources

Signposting to support services is a critical part of responding to child sexual abuse and exploitation. You should make the survivor aware of their support options at every stage of the investigation, where possible offering them a variety of pathways. Consider whether specialist services will be able to help too, based on age accessibility needs, or cultural considerations. Even if you are not sure what would be appropriate, know a few organisations you can refer to that can connect to appropriate specialists.

Independent support will benefit survivor wellbeing, and it will enable the survivor to better engage with the investigation, to navigate their options and make choices they are comfortable with, leading to a higher likelihood of a positive outcome for the survivor and the officer.

The **When You Are Ready** website provides information and links to services that support survivors, both children and adults. It does not have police branding.

Best practice for signposting

Signposting is not just about providing contact details. It requires patience, understanding and conversation.

Whilst signposting, you should:

- Approach it collaboratively. Take time to discuss options with the survivor and help them to understand what each service does.
- Make it clear which support is independent of the investigative process.
- Be honest about the availability of support (for example, waiting lists to access free mental health provision on the NHS).
- Provide written information where possible, especially contact information.

- Recognise that survivors may not want or be able to access support immediately, or may not want to tell you that they are accessing support independently, so let them know that you can have the conversation again when they feel ready.
- Let them know that you are still an ally and an advocate, but there are specialists better placed to support them emotionally, or with any specific legal questions.

Why this matters

Effective engagement and communication is one of the most important investigative tools available to policing staff working on CSAE investigations.

The way victims and survivors are supported, spoken to and updated throughout the process can significantly affect trust, engagement and confidence in the investigation. Small changes in language, consistency and approach can make a meaningful difference to both survivor wellbeing and investigative outcomes.

By using this guide, officers can bring care and consistency where they have influence and help reduce trauma, improve engagement, strengthen trust, and create a more positive experience for victims and survivors navigating the criminal justice system.

Because how survivors experience the process matters, just as much as the outcome.

