Protecting children from harm

Looking into child sexual abuse in the family network

What is child sexual abuse?

A child is sexually abused when they are forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This doesn't have to be physical contact, and it can happen online. Sometimes the child won't understand that what's happening to them is abuse. They may not even understand that it's wrong. (NSPCC)

Children have a right to be kept safe from all types of harm and abuse.

From other work that the Children's Commissioner has done, she has been very worried about what is being done to stop child sexual abuse and how well people listen to and support children who have been affected.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children should be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Children's Commissioner and her team have been very carefully looking into sexual abuse which happens within the family. We have looked at lots of information to help us understand this problem in detail.

Research shows that 1 in 20 children are sexually abused.

What have we found out so far?

Only 1 in 8 children who are sexually abused are known to the police and children's services.

This means that there are many children who are sexually abused who aren't getting any help and support.
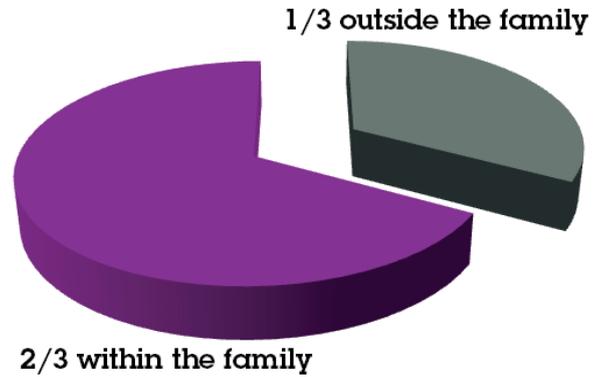
Information we have looked at shows that around two thirds of cases of sexual abuse happen within the family.

1/3 outside the family

2/3 within the family

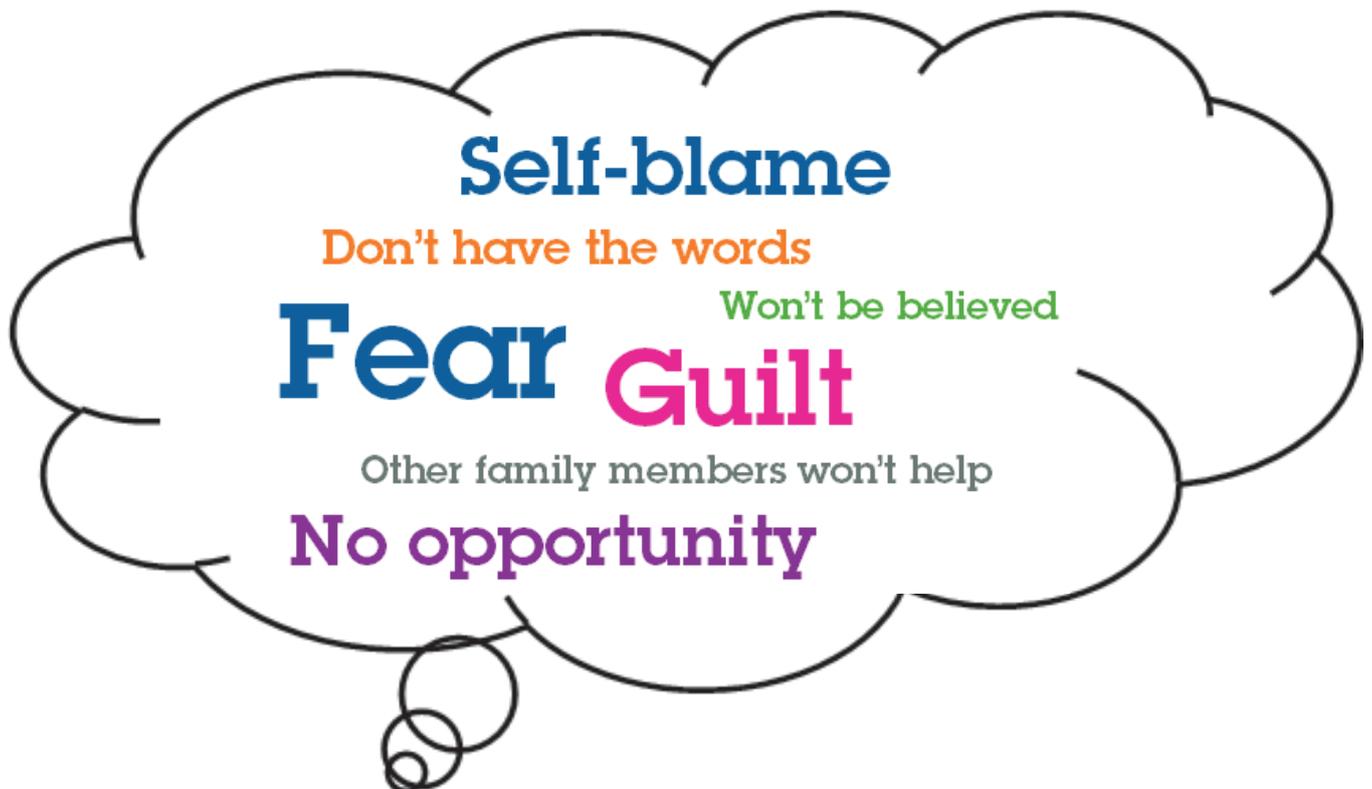Sexual abuse happens to boys and girls, and to children of all ages from all communities.

It can be really difficult for children who are being sexually abused by a family member to tell someone.

When children are younger, they might not know that they are being abused, or they might not be able to explain what is happening to an adult.

Or sometimes, children who are sexually abused by a family member are scared to tell someone. They might be worried that they won't be believed, or they are scared about what will happen if they tell.

These may be some of the reasons why children who are being sexually abused by someone in their family network are relectant to tell anyone...

Self-blame
Don't have the words
Won't be believed
Fear Guilt
Other family members won't help
No opportunity

It is really important that adults who work with children are able to spot when something might be wrong.

Spotting the signs of sexual abuse is not easy. Children who are sexually abused are very likely to be upset, confused and have poor emotional health or physical health, or their behaviour might change in some way.

What does the Children's Commissioner recommend?

Everyone who works with and supports children (including teachers and police) should:

- Make children feel safe and secure, and help them to understand that there are people they can talk to.
- Work together to better understand how children might be affected by abuse, and what signs to look out for.
- Try to stop the abuse, look after children who have been hurt and support their families. They need to do this in a kind and thoughtful way so they don't make things worse.

Children need help and support to:

- Know how to recognise when they feel uncomfortable with how an adult talks to or touches them, and who and where they can go to for help and support.
- Understand which adults they can trust when they are upset and worried, so that they are able to talk to them.

If you are worried about yourself, another child or someone you know, you can contact one of these organisations –

Childline: 0800 1111

Open 24 hours a day. You can contact ChildLine about anything, anytime. No problem is too big or too small.

Get Connected: 0808 808 4994

Open 1pm – 11pm every day. A free, confidential helpline service for young people under 25 who need help, but don't know where to turn.

Children's Commissioner
Promoting and protecting children's rights