

# A Stone Unturned

A Guide for Families of Children who have Experienced Sexual Abuse



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

n c s

National Counselling Service

**TÚSLA**

An Ghníomhaireacht um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency



*Supporting Families in Ireland*

We would like to thank the following people for their input in producing this guide:

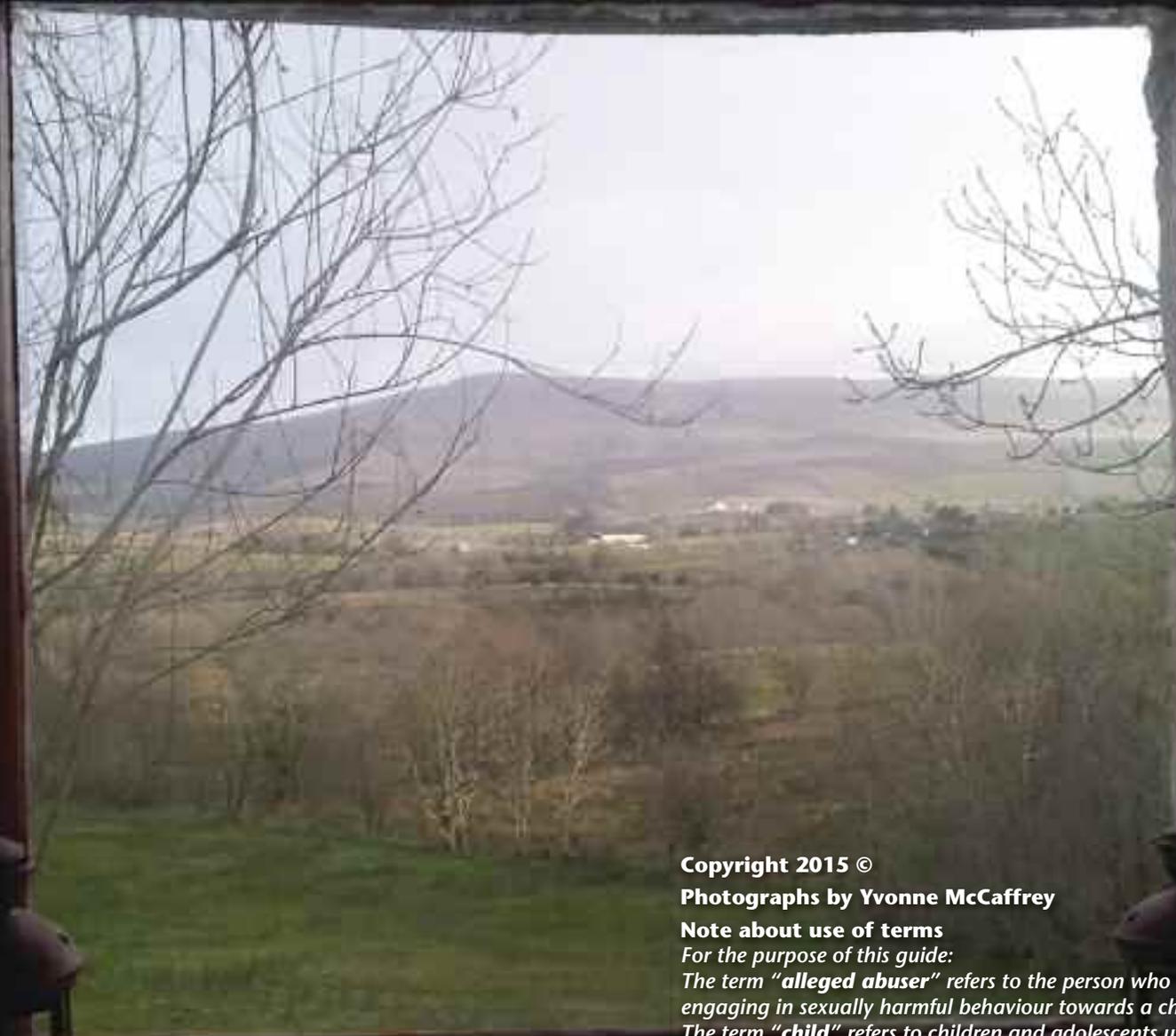
The members of the 'Support Group for Parents of Children who have Experienced Sexual Abuse' who meet monthly in the Family Life Centre, Castlebar, Co. Mayo.

The facilitators of the Support Group: Michael Burke, Senior Clinical Psychologist and Máire Ní Dhomhnaill, Counsellor, Family Life Centre, Castlebar for their on-going work and support.

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All the individuals and families with whom we have worked, who have shared their experiences and insights with us over the years.



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**Note about use of terms**

*For the purpose of this guide:*

*The term "alleged abuser" refers to the person who has been accused of engaging in sexually harmful behaviour towards a child.*

*The term "child" refers to children and adolescents up to the age of 18.*

*The term "parent" refers to parents and guardians of children or adolescents.*

**If you have any queries or concerns about sexual abuse in relation to a child, please contact your local Social Work Department, Gardaí or your family doctor.**

## FOREWORD

This guide was written by the following people, each of whom has a professional interest in promoting the welfare of young people or adults who have been affected by child sexual abuse:

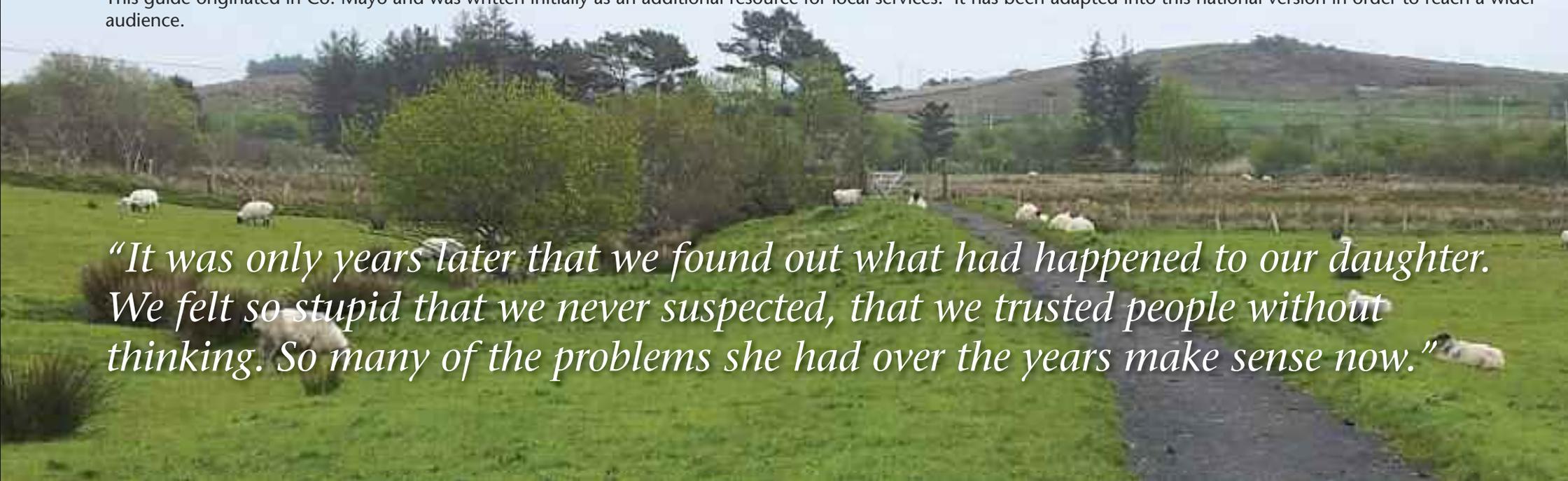
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The insights and recommendations of the members of the 'Support Group for Parents of Children who have Experienced Sexual Abuse' have been incorporated into the guide. This group is an established confidential support group based in the Family Life Centre, Castlebar, Co. Mayo. The quotes throughout the guide have been provided by members of this support group.

This guide originated in Co. Mayo and was written initially as an additional resource for local services. It has been adapted into this national version in order to reach a wider audience.



*“It was only years later that we found out what had happened to our daughter. We felt so stupid that we never suspected, that we trusted people without thinking. So many of the problems she had over the years make sense now.”*

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## INTRODUCTION

This guide is an information resource which aims to help parents and guardians to cope with the discovery of child sexual abuse in their family and to guide them in supporting the young person, themselves and others who have been affected by the situation. We hope to address some of the questions that may arise and to provide information on strategies and services that may help.

Child sexual abuse is a sad and shocking reality. The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) Report 2002, based on a national survey of adults who have experienced child sexual abuse, estimates that one in three women and one in five men were sexually abused as children. Child sexual abuse can have far-reaching effects for the young person who has been abused and for those involved in helping him or her to deal with the experience. For parents, the discovery that their child, or a child in their care has been sexually abused can be traumatic and hard to accept. Sometimes parents in this situation feel helpless or hopeless, and they may at that time believe that life can never be good again. But recovery from the trauma of sexual abuse, for both the young person and those involved in their lives, can and does take place. While each situation is different, and each individual involved unique, there is support available with the issues that arise. As a parent, you can do much to help and support your child through the experience and impact of sexual abuse.

This guide may be helpful in navigating this journey.





## PART ONE: INFORMATION ON CHILD ABUSE

In the past decade in Ireland, the issue of child abuse has come to the fore through media attention and attempts to address shortfalls in the Irish child protection system. The following section outlines some facts in relation to abuse, and the process that may be followed in the investigation of child sexual abuse.

### What is Child Abuse?

Children are dependent on adults for their care and attention. They have physical needs, such as the need to be fed, kept warm and provided with a safe home environment. Of equal importance are emotional needs, such as the need to experience love, care and affection. When these needs are not met over time, and the child is being affected in a negative way, this constitutes abuse.

**Child abuse** can be categorised into four different types: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. A child may be subjected to one or more forms of abuse at any given time.

**Neglect** is where a child suffers because they are deprived of food, warmth, hygiene, intellectual stimulation, supervision, safety and medical care, as well as affection from adults.

**Emotional abuse** is where a child suffers because their need for approval, consistency, and security are not met. It can include persistent criticism, being harshly punished and being exposed to physical and verbal violence.

**Physical abuse** is where a child suffers because they are physically harmed by someone else, or are roughly handled or punished harshly.

More detailed information on neglect, emotional abuse and physical abuse is outlined in *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011*. This document can be viewed in full on [www.dcyu.gov.ie](http://www.dcyu.gov.ie).

Sexual abuse is where a child is used by another person for his or her sexual interests and arousal. Sexual abuse can be 'contact' (where direct touching is involved) or 'non-contact' (where no direct touching is involved). In the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children Document 2011* (Section 2.5.1) Child Sexual Abuse is defined as follows:

*Sexual abuse occurs when a child is used by another person for his or her gratification or sexual arousal, or for that of others. Examples of child sexual abuse include:*

- 1) *Exposure of the sexual organs or any sexual act intentionally performed in the presence of a child;*
- 2) *Intentional touching or molesting of the body of a child whether by a person or object for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification;*
- 3) *Masturbation in the presence of the child or the involvement of the child in an act of masturbation;*
- 4) *Sexual intercourse with the child, whether oral, vaginal or anal;*
- 5) *Sexual exploitation of a child, which includes inciting, encouraging, propositioning, requiring or permitting a child to solicit for, or to engage in, prostitution or other sexual acts. Sexual exploitation also occurs when a child is involved in the exhibition, modeling or posing for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification or sexual act, including its recording (on film, video tape or other*

*media) or the manipulation, for those purposes, of the image by computer or other means. It may also include showing sexually explicit material to children, which is often a feature of the 'grooming' process by perpetrators of abuse;*

- 6) *Consensual sexual activity involving an adult and an underage person. In relation to child sexual abuse, it should be noted that, for the purposes of criminal law, the age of consent to sexual intercourse is 17 for both boys and girls.*

#### How does Sexual Abuse Happen?

Every single case of child sexual abuse is different, and a child is never to blame. Most parents have great difficulty understanding how someone could betray the trust of a child in such a way. This betrayal of trust can be confusing and difficult to comprehend for all involved.

- Children of all ages, race, social class and gender are vulnerable to sexual abuse.
- Children can be abused by males or females.
- A child can be sexually abused by a stranger who seizes an opportunity to abuse a child who, at that time, was not in the presence of an adult or carer.
- A child can be sexually abused by an older child or adolescent.
- Statistics show that children are most often abused by a family member or by someone who is known and trusted by the child and his or her family.



*“Sometimes I was so angry, I wanted to go and kill the person. I knew I couldn’t but the anger was terrible at times.”*

- Abuse can occur as a once-off incident or over a period of time and in secret.
- Regardless of whether the abuse happened once or over time it is important to remember that a child is **never** in a position to make a valid or informed choice about sexual acts.
- Sometimes abusers befriend the child’s parents or family, which can make it very difficult for the child to talk about the abuse.
- A child may like the positive attention they receive but they may feel powerless in relation to the adult’s inappropriate and secret sexual behaviour.

#### How can Sexual Abuse go on for a Period of Time and in Secret?

- Children have a natural need to be loved and valued, and people who abuse children are often aware of this.
- Those who sexually abuse children sometimes employ persuasive and manipulative tactics to keep the child engaged. This strategy is often referred to as ‘grooming’ and may include buying gifts or arranging special activities. The grooming strategy can confuse the child.
- Grooming is a gradual and calculated process that involves befriending the child, creating opportunities to be alone with the child and making them feel special before engaging him or her in sexual activity over a period of time.
- Sometimes an abuser may take advantage of a child’s sense of kindness or willingness to please an adult, by asking for their help as a means of gaining their trust.
- Those who sexually abuse children often use play, deception, threats or other forms of coercion to engage children in sexual activity and to maintain their silence.

#### How does Sexual Abuse come to Light?

Sexual abuse can be disclosed in different ways. Children may:

- Say things indirectly or make references to the abuse.
- Behave in a way that causes a parent to become suspicious, which may eventually lead to a disclosure.
- Immediately tell a parent what happened, directly in their own words.
- Tell someone outside the family, a friend at school, a family friend or a teacher.

When a child either inadvertently or deliberately makes a disclosure of sexual abuse to someone outside of the family, a parent can find it challenging and difficult to comprehend. Many parents can find it hard to take in the information, or they can feel dismayed that their child did not immediately tell them what happened. Although a parent can find the discovery of their child’s experience of sexual abuse very painful, whatever the circumstances of the disclosure, the most important fact is that the abuse has come to light and that the child can now be protected.

### What makes it Difficult for a Child to Tell?

If the abuse was not disclosed by the child immediately, parents often wonder why their child did not tell them what had happened. This is a complex issue, unique to each individual situation. Some, all or none of the factors below may apply to your child. These factors can contribute to a child's difficulty in talking about sexual abuse:

- Historically in Irish culture and in other cultures and countries there has been a pattern of secrecy around the topic of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Generations of Irish people were taught not to speak about this aspect of their lives. Although our society is changing in this regard, the topic of sexuality is still a subject that is not discussed openly in many homes across the country. This can make it difficult for a child to find the words to explain an adult's secret and inappropriate sexual behaviour towards them.
- It can be a very confusing time for a child who is exposed to behaviour outside their realm of understanding or experience. It is very important to keep your child's age and stage of development in mind. It is very easy as a parent to presume that a child has a grasp of adult concepts and language. Very often, due to their age and stage of development, a child does not have the language to understand or to clearly describe what has happened.
- Very young children may not understand that the actions of the abuser are wrong, particularly if the sexual abuse has been made into a game.
- Children often do not disclose sexual abuse, as they may fear the consequences of telling, for example, that they would not be believed, or that they could get into trouble.
- If the abuser is someone the child or family cares about, the child may worry about the fall-out of a disclosure on the rest of the family. The child may not want to upset anyone by telling.
- In some situations the abuser may have rewarded the child for not telling.
- The child may have been told not to tell anyone and therefore may feel uncomfortable about breaking a promise.
- The child may feel embarrassed as they may realise what the abuser is doing is wrong, which may also make it difficult for them to tell someone what happened.
- The abuser may have threatened the child and/or have made threats about the child's family.
- A child may have been led to believe that they willingly participated in the abuse or they may have been told that the abuse was their fault. This is never the case.
- The child may believe that they have already told someone about the abuse. Younger children often talk about topics out of context or they assume that others have a prior understanding of a situation. They may give a little bit of information, but not enough for a parent to understand the full picture.



- The child may have been told by the abuser that others knew about the abuse already. This would serve to silence the child.
- The child or adolescent may have been led to believe that they were in a special relationship with the alleged abuser.
- If the alleged abuser was a family member the child may fear that if they told, the alleged abuser would go to prison or have to leave the family and they would have to deal with the consequences of this for the family unit.

Abuse is a very complex issue which may explain why children often do not tell, and why child sexual abuse is often discovered indirectly. The individual situation for your child needs to be taken into consideration when you are working out what supports are needed for you, your child and your family. Parents often report feeling strong emotions such as sadness, anger and guilt, and it is important to have a safe place to deal with these emotions.



*“We felt so alone, even ashamed, why was this happening to us? When the abuse happened it was someone in my husband’s family. That was hard. Who could you talk to? You wanted to do everything to protect your child’s anonymity but you desperately wanted to confront the denial that often happens too.”*

## PART TWO: FOLLOWING THE DISCOVERY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

It is difficult to be exact about the prevalence of child sexual abuse, as it often goes unreported. In the last couple of decades child abuse in Ireland has come to media attention and recognition.

In July 2011 the then Minister for Children and Youth affairs, Ms Frances Fitzgerald launched the updated '*Children First National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*'. This document promotes the protection of children and sets out specific protocols for Child and Family Agency Social Workers, Health Professionals and the Gardaí in dealing with cases of suspected abuse and neglect. This document builds on existing frameworks and legislation that have been put in place to protect children, and it places an obligation on those who are involved with, or who work with children, to report concerns that they may have in relation to child sexual abuse. These are the guidelines that inform clinical practice.

Many reports in relation to the abuse of children in Irish families and in the care system have been published. In an attempt to address the shortfalls in the system, consideration is being given to bringing the Children First National Guidelines into legislation.

### The Discovery of Sexual Abuse

Many parents have reported that when they first discovered that their child had experienced sexual abuse, they had to deal with a whole range of emotions. Parents have often commented that the news came as a huge shock to them as there had been no clear indicators to alert them to what was happening. Often the reality is that the child was abused by a family member or friend.

For a parent this can be particularly shocking, and the last thing that they imagined to be possible. As well as dealing with the shock, parents have reported that they felt very unsure about what to do, or where to turn for support. They have commented that they would have welcomed some clear information on the process involved in investigating the allegation of child sexual abuse. Each case is different and each family has differing needs. It is important to discuss this with the intake or duty social worker involved with your family. The investigative process, guided by current legislation is outlined in the following section.

In each county, there are Child and Family Agency Social Work teams. They have the responsibility of completing assessments with families. In a suspected case of child sexual abuse, a specified social worker from the Child and Family Agency will make initial contact with the family. The procedure in relation to investigating child sexual abuse is as follows:

### Referral to Child and Family Agency

When a child abuse allegation comes to the attention of the Child and Family Agency there are procedures in place in relation to reporting the allegation and starting the assessment process. The Gardaí and the Child and Family Agency are the two statutory bodies responsible for investigating and assessing allegations of sexual abuse. This can be a challenging time for families who are unfamiliar with the system and who are dealing with the range of emotions involved e.g. shock, upset and fear of the unknown. It is important to note that all cases are different and are treated on an individual basis.

### The Process Involved in Investigating Child Sexual Abuse

#### Referral to Child and Family Agency



#### Role of Child and Family Agency

- Priority is to ensure child is safe from further abuse
  - Notification to An Garda Síochána



#### Strategy Meeting

- Between Child and Family Agency Social Worker and An Garda Síochána
  - An Garda Síochána may also initiate their own separate procedures in relation to a criminal investigation



#### Initial Assessment by Child and Family Agency Social Worker

- Meeting with Parents



#### Interview with Child



#### Interview with Alleged Abuser



#### Contact with other Relevant Agencies



#### Outcome of Assessment



#### Follow up Therapeutic Support

- Possible request for a child protection case conference



### **The Role of the Child and Family Agency**

The Child and Family Agency Social Work Department usually has a leading role at this stage, and the first priority of a social worker is always to ensure that the child is safe from further abuse. The course of action required will depend on the individual case i.e. if the alleged abuser is living with the child, this is the first issue that will be addressed. Child and Family Agency social workers have a duty to contact the Gardaí about all allegations of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and willful neglect. The social worker will also try to identify any supports that the child or family need at this time.

### **Role of An Garda Síochána**

The role of An Garda Síochána is to investigate any matter in relation to the alleged abuse which is deemed to be of a criminal nature. They may initiate their own separate procedures in relation to a criminal investigation.

### **Strategy Meeting**

A strategy meeting may be organised in order to fully assess the situation

- This may involve a Child and Family Agency social worker meeting with Gardaí to decide who will carry out the initial interview with the child and how to proceed.
- In some cases a medical examination with a qualified medical professional may be arranged.

### **Initial Assessment**

The initial assessment is carried out by the Social Work Department and usually involves a plan being made to ensure the safety of the child, and to establish what steps need to be taken with regard to investigating the allegation. Where the alleged abuser does not live in the family home, the Child and Family Agency informs parents of the process involved in making a disclosure of sexual abuse. Advice or guidance may also be provided in relation to therapeutic supports, if required.

The Child and Family Agency also has a role in assessing any other children who may be identified as being at risk. The social worker usually meets with parents to discuss the concerns reported to the Social Work Department.

### **Interview with Child**

Social workers and Gardaí have specialised training in interviewing children in situations where there has been an allegation of child abuse. Initially the child may be seen without the presence of his or her parents, so that they have an opportunity to give their own account of what happened in their own words. In some cases more than one interview may be required to ensure that the child has had an opportunity to give a clear account of what happened.

### **Interview with Alleged Abuser**

It is usually the role of Social Workers to meet with the alleged abuser. The purpose of this meeting is to inform the alleged abuser of the allegations that have been made and to provide an opportunity for a response. It is advisable that parents refrain from making direct contact with the alleged abuser.

### **Contact with other Agencies**

In certain cases contact will be made with other agencies involved with the child e.g. family doctor. It is important to note that all cases are different and are considered on an individual basis.



### Outcome of Assessment

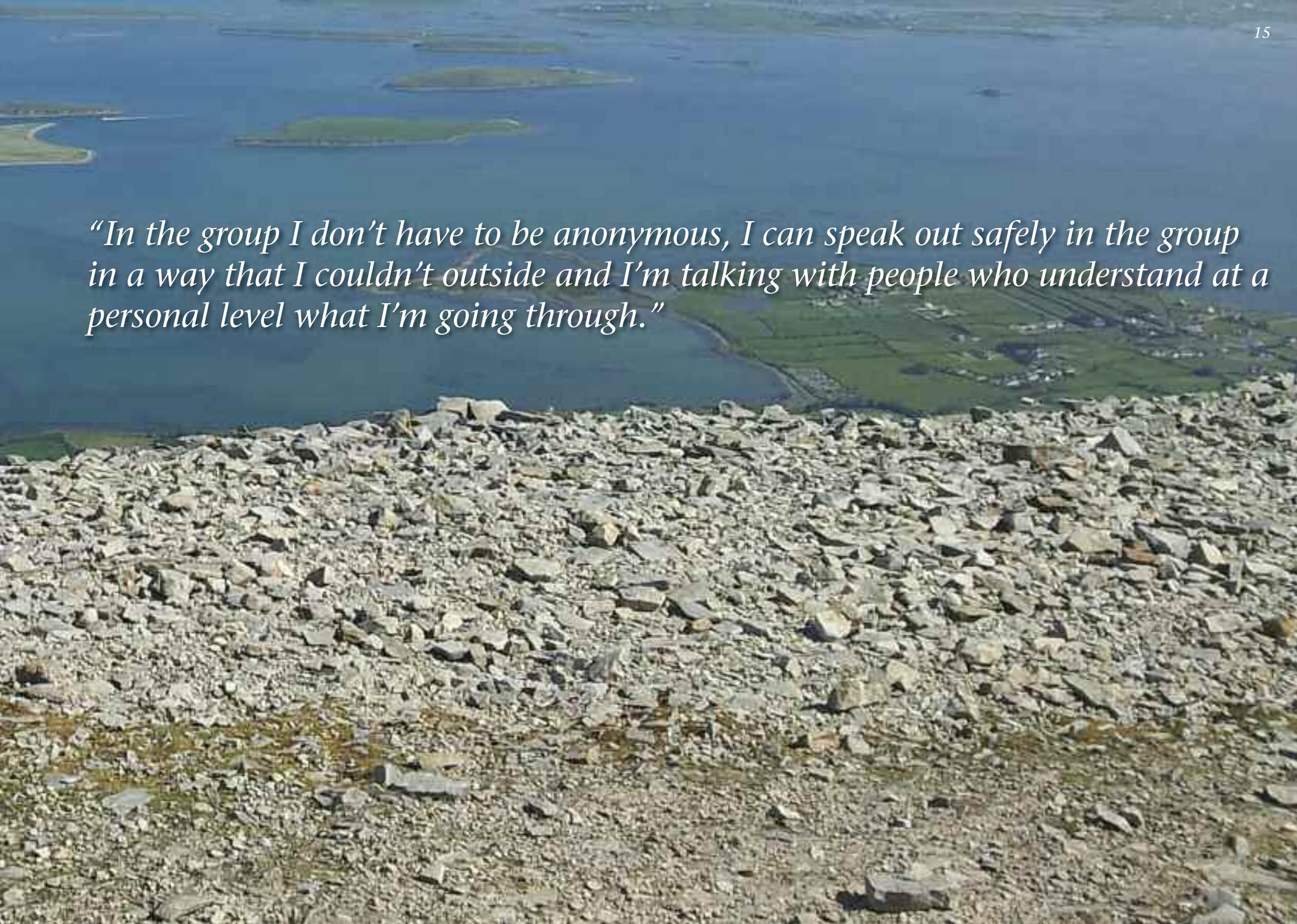
At the end of the initial assessment the Child and Family Agency Social Worker will discuss the outcome of the assessment with the parent. The possible outcomes are as follows:

1. **Suspected child abuse:** In cases where child abuse is suspected and concerns are ongoing, consideration will be given to the organisation of a child protection case conference. The outcome of the conference may be that the child's name be placed on the Child Protection Notification System and a child protection plan agreed.
2. **Child welfare concerns:** Where there are child welfare concerns, a family support plan will need to be put in place.
3. **No risk identified:** The case may be closed by the Social Work Department if it is ascertained that parents are able to protect the child, and if the child is not deemed to be at risk. However, if it is felt that supports are needed, the social worker involved will discuss this with the family.

### Follow-up Therapeutic Support

Once the investigative process is complete, a recommendation will be made by the Social Work Department in relation to supports that may be helpful to the family. During the initial stages, support may involve input from services such as social work and/or psychology which may help to guide and empower parents to meet their child's emotional needs at this time. At a later date the child may benefit from individual support.

Parents often face the challenging task of managing their own wide range of feelings about, and reactions to what has happened, while also supporting and helping their child to cope. Sometimes it can be difficult to accept or believe that the abuse has happened, particularly if the alleged abuser was known to and trusted by the family. Parents have commented that their ability to trust in people was shaken as a result of their changed situation. Anger, rage and a desire for revenge are feelings that are commonly reported at this stage. Parents often worry about the impact that the abuse will have on the child's life and also on the lives of those inside or outside the family. It may be helpful therefore, for parents to discuss these concerns with their local social work and/ or child and adolescent psychology service.



*“In the group I don’t have to be anonymous, I can speak out safely in the group in a way that I couldn’t outside and I’m talking with people who understand at a personal level what I’m going through.”*

## PART THREE: HOW TO SUPPORT THOSE AFFECTED BY CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Children and adolescents react in different ways to upsetting life events. Young people can be affected by lots of issues such as friendship difficulties, bullying and problems in school or at home. These issues can often result in a child showing signs of emotional upset. Many of the emotional reactions outlined in the next section may typically occur when a child is experiencing distress in relation to an upsetting life event, or they may be associated with sexual abuse if this is a concern in relation to the child.

### How Children may React

Children's reactions to abuse vary hugely, depending on many factors, including the age of the child, the nature of abuse that occurred, the child's emotional involvement with the alleged abuser, their understanding of the abuse and the way in which the disclosure and follow-through was managed. Some parents have commented that they did notice a change in their child's behaviour, but that without a disclosure they had no way of linking it to sexual abuse. They may have wondered what was going on for their child, but may have put it down to something that was happening in school, with friends or to do with their developmental stage. It is not unusual for parents in this situation to reflect on this after the disclosure, but it is important to remember that the parent is not to blame, as without the full picture he or she was not in a position to take protective action.

**Emotions:** The range of feelings that a child may have following an experience of sexual abuse is vast. He or she may be upset, frightened, angry, guilty, ashamed, embarrassed or a combination of all of the above. In contrast he or she may not appear to have strong feelings about the incident at all and may wish to carry on as normal.

**Behaviours:** The child may react by becoming withdrawn and secretive or becoming clingy and tearful. The child might start bed-wetting when previously dry or may have nightmares. He or she may have difficulty concentrating at school and might report ailments such as headaches, stomach aches and pains. There may be changes in eating habits, for example over or under-eating or he or she might display uncharacteristic aggressive behaviour at home or with siblings, peers and teachers.

**Sexualised Behaviour:** A child may display sexualised behaviour such as making sexual comments, compulsively masturbating, behaving sexually with other children or adults or re-enacting sexual scenes in imaginative play. A child may have experienced a sexual awakening at an earlier stage than expected. It may be that the child had a pleasurable physical reaction to the abuse, which is out of their conscious control. He or she may then repeat this by self-stimulation once the abuse ends. A child has no control over their body's physical responses to sexual stimulation. While this can be difficult for parents to comprehend, self-stimulation and sexualised behaviour can be a means by which children work through their experiences. This can be addressed with age-appropriate sex education, and by helping the child to establish age-appropriate ways of dealing with sexual needs and urges.

**Very little noticeable reaction:** The child may also continue on as usual and show very little reaction to what has happened. Parents sometimes report that their child appears to have moved on with his or her life, while they themselves report feeling "stuck in the situation". Parents who have had access to a support group have commented that they benefitted greatly from attending the support group, as they were able to share these feelings with other parents who understood what they were going through. Some children can have delayed reactions to trauma, months or years after the original event. It may be that this is the only way that the child can deal with their experience for now. It is important to note that the child's feelings about the abuse may change over time as they develop the ability to reflect on, or to understand what has happened to them. The way in which the child reacts and behaves will determine what is needed from the parents in supporting the child to deal with the abuse experienced.



### What does a Child need after Sexual Abuse is Disclosed?

Following a disclosure of sexual abuse, most children benefit from the following responses:

- Comfort, support and acceptance.
- Assurance that they are safe from further abuse.
- Validation in relation to their emotional reactions i.e. a sense that their parent accepts and understands their feelings, examples of which may be fear, sadness, anger, confusion or numbness.
- Age appropriate information to help them to understand what has happened.
- Reassurance that they are not alone, and that support is available for them if needed.
- Reassurance that they and their family will be able to cope.
- Reassurance that they are in no way responsible for the abuse.

### How to Respond to your Child

Whether a child tells you directly that they have been sexually abused or whether the allegation comes to light indirectly, the following suggestions may be helpful:

- Tell your child that you have taken what they have told you seriously.
- Reassure your child.
- Accept the child's experiences without judgement or blame and try not to express overly negative opinions, even about the alleged abuser.
- Make it clear to your child that he or she is not in trouble, and that you do not blame him or her for what has happened.
- Assure your child that you will do all that you can to keep them safe.
- Let your child know that they are loved.
- Tell your child that you are glad that he or she told you.
- Give your child time to talk to you at their pace now and in the future.
- Be open and clear with your child in a way that is age appropriate i.e. in language that they can understand.
- It is important to remain calm when talking with your child, as he or she may be confused by your understandable anger and negative emotions.
- Try to keep a sense of routine and normality so that your child gets the message that you can cope with the news.

Like adults, children do not always know how to get their needs met. Children may deal with their upset and anger by behaving badly and testing you to the limit, even though what they really want or need is a supportive hug. This can be challenging for parents, but it is important to remain calm. What can be helpful in this situation is to acknowledge the child's upset, and to offer comfort, love and support, whilst also setting clear expectations and limits for behaviour. It is important that routines in relation to mealtimes and bedtimes remain as usual, as the predictability of such routines help children to feel safe. It would be easy to fall into the habit of not disciplining your child and abandoning house rules or expectations such as chores that were previously in place. However, consistency in parenting is the safest and most effective approach for all the family at this time. Your child needs to know that they will be treated in the same way as the rest of the family and that daily life, although somewhat changed, will continue.

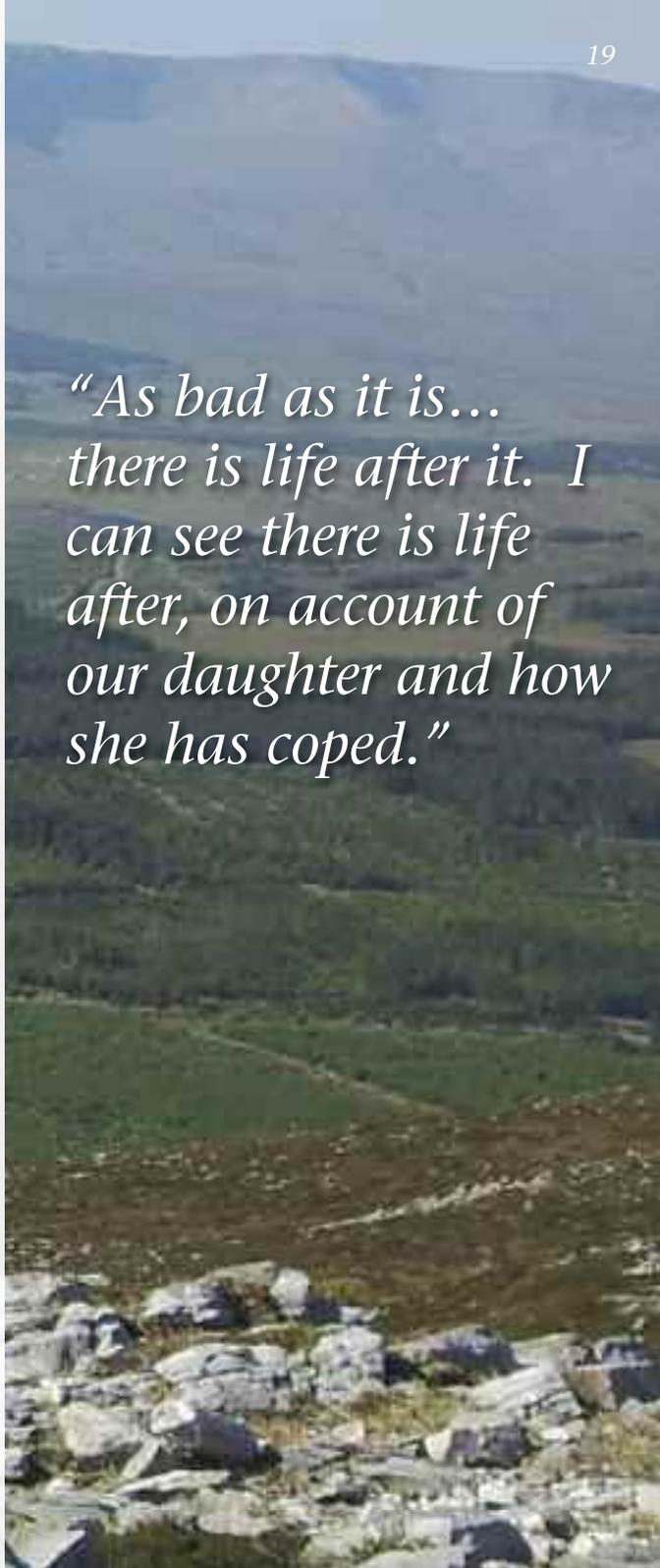
It can be difficult to know what is best to say and not to say to your child. Possibly the most important thing to get across to your child, through words or actions, is that you **do not blame the child for the abuse**. Do not presume that your child knows how you feel about them. He or she will need reassurance. Your child may not wish to talk about what has happened, but it is important that he or she knows that you are there to listen if they do want to talk. It may be important to let them know that they can also talk to another trusted family member or to a professional, if preferred. It is important to acknowledge what has happened but also to help the child to continue with daily activities and life, including playing and having fun.

### Supporting the Rest of the Family

Child sexual abuse has a ripple effect on all the family and the impact can be wide reaching. Individual family members can be affected in different ways, and it is not uncommon for the discovery of child sexual abuse to have an impact on a parent's own relationships with their partner, children, relatives and neighbours. You may wish to discuss what has happened with some friends and family or you may not wish to talk to others. You and your child have a right to privacy, but it may be worthwhile to identify some trusted people in whom you may be able to confide if you think that this would be helpful. If others are aware of the disclosure, it may be useful to anticipate responses to give to people who may ask unwanted or awkward direct questions, for example

*"Thank you for your concern and we are dealing with it as best we can..."* You may wish to give your child some guidance about how to respond to unwanted or awkward questions, in order to protect them.

It may be useful to have a conversation with immediate family members and close relatives including the siblings of the child who has been abused. It will be important to note that the other children in the family may also have a range of feelings about the discovery of sexual abuse. They too may feel frightened, upset, angry or jealous of the adult attention that their sibling is getting. It is important to talk to them about what has happened and how it is impacting on them. They may be wondering why they were not abused too, or they may disclose uncomfortable experiences they themselves have been through. They may find it hard to believe or accept that

A scenic landscape with rolling hills and a rocky foreground. The hills are covered in green grass and some trees, and the sky is a clear blue. The foreground is filled with grey and brown rocks of various sizes.

*"As bad as it is... there is life after it. I can see there is life after, on account of our daughter and how she has coped."*

the abuse happened. They may feel worried about family members and may fear that things will never be the same again. They may feel a huge loss of a relationship and trust, especially if the alleged abuser was a friend or family member.

If the alleged abuser was a family member or a neighbour this can present a particular challenge, as the likelihood of you or your child meeting them by accident or at organised events, is increased. If there are legal proceedings in place, your social worker or the Gardai may be able to give advice in relation to managing these issues in the best interests of you, your child and your family's safety and well being.

### Supporting Yourself

The range of feelings you experience may be similar to those experienced following a bereavement. You may experience a sense of loss and feel that everything has changed for you and your family. You may grieve for your child's and your own sense of safety and trust. Examples of the range of feelings that are common following the disclosure of child sexual abuse are:

**Disbelief:** feeling that the whole experience is unreal.

**Denial:** an inability to accept the reality of what has happened.

**Shock:** feeling numb, stunned, and unable to think straight.

**Anger and rage:** towards the alleged abuser, towards members of your family or friends, and a desire for revenge against the alleged abuser.

**Guilt:** about past interactions, about parenting styles or missed signals in relation to the abuse.

**Relief:** that you know what has happened and your child is now safe.

**Fear:** as to what will happen next and what the consequences will be.

**Anxiety:** loss of confidence and trust, uncertainty, a feeling of a lack of control.

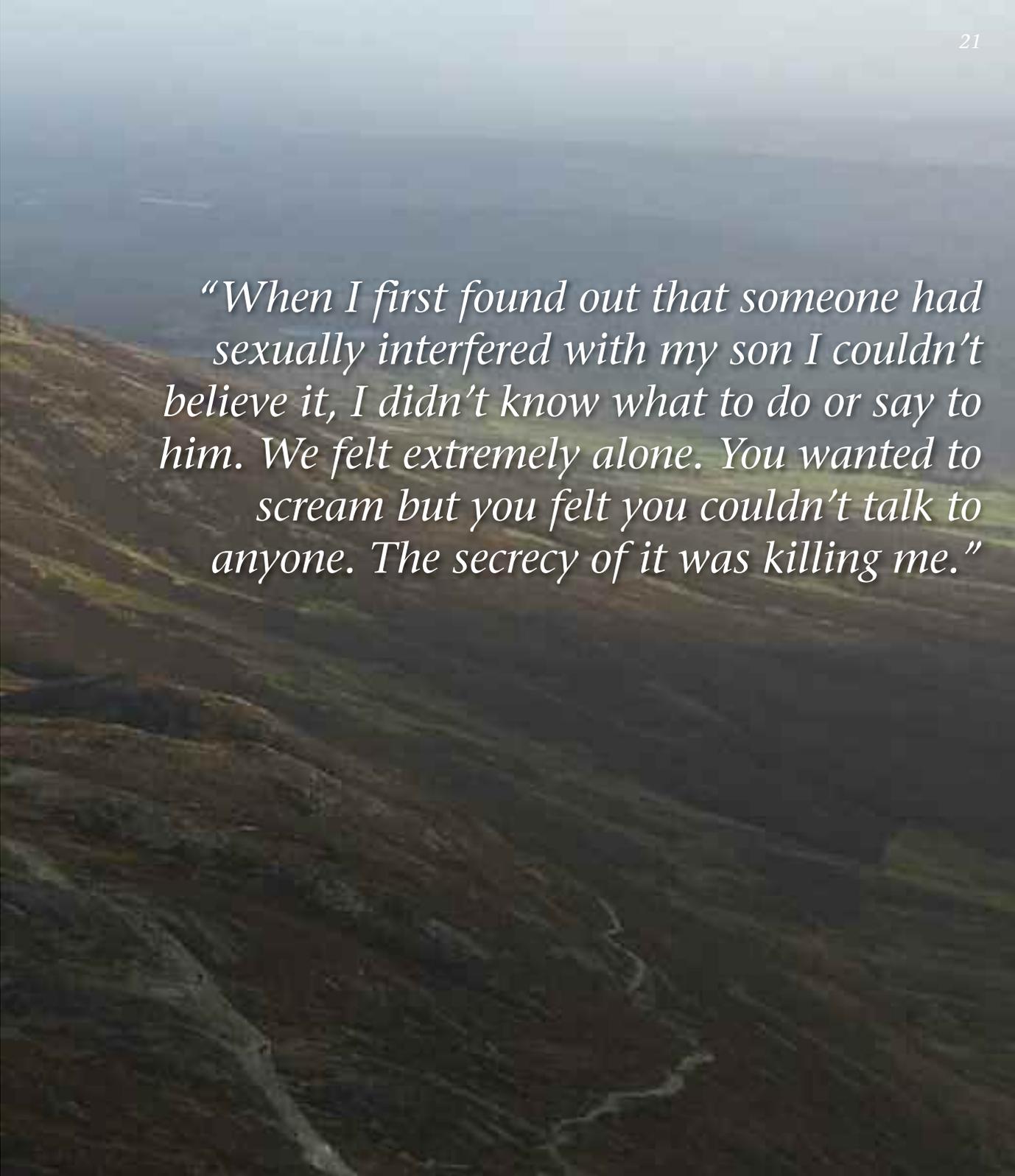
**Loneliness and Isolation:** having to deal with the reality of what has happened, and feeling like you have less in common with your friends and family.

How you react to this experience may depend on a variety of factors, for example the nature and extent of the abuse disclosed, the manner in which the disclosure came to light, the relationship that you had with the alleged abuser and their behaviour since the disclosure was made. In some instances the alleged abuser denies the abuse and behaves in a negative way towards the family. This adds to the upset and pain of the situation.

How you are affected by the abuse may also depend on your own past experiences, your culture, your supports and your own background. Dealing with the sexual abuse of your child may trigger memories of abusive experiences in your own childhood. If you have experienced abuse in your childhood there is professional counselling available from the HSE National Adult Counselling Service.

Sometimes shock can affect us physically as the body tries to cope with the impact of traumatic events. You may have difficulty concentrating or sleeping. You may have vivid dreams when you sleep, you may lose your appetite or you may comfort eat. You may have good days and bad days. You are likely to cope better if you can make time for yourself and if you can reach out to someone you can trust, for support. When you are in a caring role it may be difficult to attend to your own needs. In order to best support your child it is a good idea to engage in activities that help to soothe and support you. You might like to get involved in a sporting activity or hobby, or just like to get out for a drive or walk. It is important that you continue to do this for yourself.

The responsibility for the abuse lies with the person who has engaged in sexual behaviour with the child. As a parent, you may feel very protective towards your child and angry at what has happened. Your child may feel responsible for not telling sooner and you may feel responsible for not finding out about the abuse or for the changes that have occurred in your family. These are common feelings for parents in this situation. You may find it helpful to link up with friends who are supportive. It may be that you also make new friends through a support group or a new interest. Parenting is a difficult role and it can be reassuring to link in with other parents in a supportive and safe environment such as a support group. This may allow you the space to vent your feelings, whatever they are, safely and separately from your child and family.

An aerial photograph of a rugged, mountainous landscape. The terrain is dark and textured, with a prominent river valley winding through the center. The sky is overcast and grey, creating a somber and atmospheric mood. The overall scene is desolate and emphasizes the isolation of the subject matter.

*“When I first found out that someone had sexually interfered with my son I couldn’t believe it, I didn’t know what to do or say to him. We felt extremely alone. You wanted to scream but you felt you couldn’t talk to anyone. The secrecy of it was killing me.”*

## PART FOUR: COMMON QUESTIONS ASKED BY PARENTS

### **When I first heard about the sexual abuse I didn't react as well as I should have, what can I do?**

When in shock, people react in different ways and that is understandable. Some people get angry and others become overwhelmed with sadness. Your own reaction to the disclosure may have influenced how you initially responded to your child. If you are concerned about your immediate reaction, you can discuss this with your child. It may be helpful to explain that you were in a state of shock at first, but to let your child know that you now feel calmer and better able to cope.

### **When I first heard about the sexual abuse I was calm and able to deal with the situation. Now as time has passed I am not coping as well. Is this normal?**

People react to stressful situations in different ways. Sometimes the reaction to the discovery that your child has been sexually abused can be compared to a grief reaction, in that a person can feel numb initially but may later feel the emotions associated with the situation. Self care is very important and you may wish to consider attending individual counselling or a support group to help manage these feelings.

### **Am I to blame?**

The responsibility for child abuse lies fully with the person who has engaged in sexual behaviour with the child. Many parents report that while trying to come to terms with what has happened to their child, they tend to question, and sometimes blame themselves. It may help to be able to work through these feelings with a supportive person or group.

### **Is my child to blame?**

No, your child is not to blame. The alleged abuser may have worked hard to shift responsibility away from themselves and onto others. However, the person responsible for the abuse is the person who interfered sexually with the child.

### **What effect does sexual abuse have on a child's relationships with other people?**

With sexual abuse, a child has to deal with something that they do not fully understand. The child may not realise that what is happening is wrong and this can be very confusing, especially if the person who has carried out the abuse is someone that they have trusted. A child may have found the experience very frightening and distressing. In sexual abuse, trust is betrayed and this can have an impact on the child's ability to feel safe around other people. In this case, the child may have an increased need for company or may require extra comfort and reassurance while these feelings last. The child might benefit from a clear plan of action in relation to their fears, for example, a designated person to talk to about any anxieties that they may have. Each child is different and many of the issues that may emerge can be alleviated by ongoing support from protective people. It can be helpful to keep the lines of communication open with a child by spending time talking to them about their feelings in relation to neutral topics such as friends, hobbies etc, as this will make it easier for the child to talk about more difficult topics, such as their feelings about the sexual abuse.

### **What should I do if my child behaves in a sexual way?**

Sexual curiosity and behaviour in children is a natural and healthy part of their development. An interest in sexual exploration can vary from child to child and can begin at an early age. It is an information gathering process where children are fascinated by their own bodies, their body parts and that of others.

There is a continuum of sexual behaviours in children that range from natural and healthy to problematic. It is healthy for a small child to ask questions about body parts and to have an interest in this aspect of their development. However, if you feel that your child is preoccupied with sexual behaviour despite your attempts to address this with him or her, then it may be beneficial to seek professional guidance to help deal with the situation sensitively and effectively.

A child who has been exposed to abusive media, pornographic material or who has experienced sexual abuse may have learned certain sexual behaviours and attitudes that may result in problematic sexual behaviour. The extent and nature of their exposure may have an impact on the level of sexual behaviour exhibited. It is problematic when sexual expression involves the use of emotional or physical force, or coercion to engage another child in sexual behaviour. A child may require some professional support in relation to this. If you are concerned about a child who is displaying problematic sexual behaviour, it would be advisable to seek professional help through your family doctor.

### **Will my child be able to have normal relationships?**

There is no reason why your child will not go on to have normal relationships. A person who abuses a child is abusing their power in an unequal relationship. It is important that young people and adolescents get the message that any sexual relationship should be mutually consenting and respectful of both parties involved.

### **Will my child need counselling?**

Every situation is different and as a result every child's needs are also different. Sometimes a child can benefit from talking to a professional and can work through difficult issues once they get to know and trust their counsellor. It may be that they do not require counselling immediately but may wish to see a professional, should issues emerge over time. Very often, good family support is most beneficial to children. Parents may find it useful to link in with trained professionals for support and advice in relation to parenting their child following an incident of child sexual abuse.





### **How will I know when to seek professional help?**

If your child is having difficulties that are having an impact on their daily functioning, or if they are showing signs of distress, it may be useful to seek professional help. Worrying signs include refusal to go to school, under-eating or over-eating, low mood or incidents of self harm. If your child is having recurring nightmares, sleep difficulties or distressing day-time flashbacks it would be advisable to seek professional help in relation to the management of these symptoms.

### **Will my child grow up to be an abuser?**

The vast majority of children who have been abused do not go on to abuse others. However, if your child is confused in relation to appropriate sexual behaviour, then this can and should be addressed within the family or with the help of a professional. The process of reporting the abuse and ensuring that your child and other children are safe sends an important message to your child. Your child sees that it is inappropriate to interfere sexually with a child and learns that all children have a right to be safe.

### **Are there services available for children, adolescents and adults who engage in sexually harmful behaviour?**

In the course of the investigative process it may emerge that a child or adolescent has engaged in sexually harmful behaviour. If the young person acknowledges the sexually harmful behaviour and parental/caregiver's consent is approved, a referral may be made by the Social Work department to a specialist treatment service.

If it emerges in the course of the investigation that an adult has engaged in sexually harmful behaviour and is looking for treatment, this can be discussed with professionals. There are HSE treatment services in some geographical areas and there are also a number of organisations and private therapists who offer services for adults who have engaged in sexually harmful behaviour.

### **Why is it that some of my family/neighbours do not believe that the abuse happened?**

Parents often come up against the difficulty that friends or family will not acknowledge what has happened to their child. They may be in denial, or they may choose, for their own reasons, not to believe what they have heard. While this is extremely distressing for parents and it sometimes involves a loss in friendships and relationships, the most important thing is that your child is safe and is believed by those on whom he or she depends.

### How will we manage the next family or community event as the alleged abuser may be there?

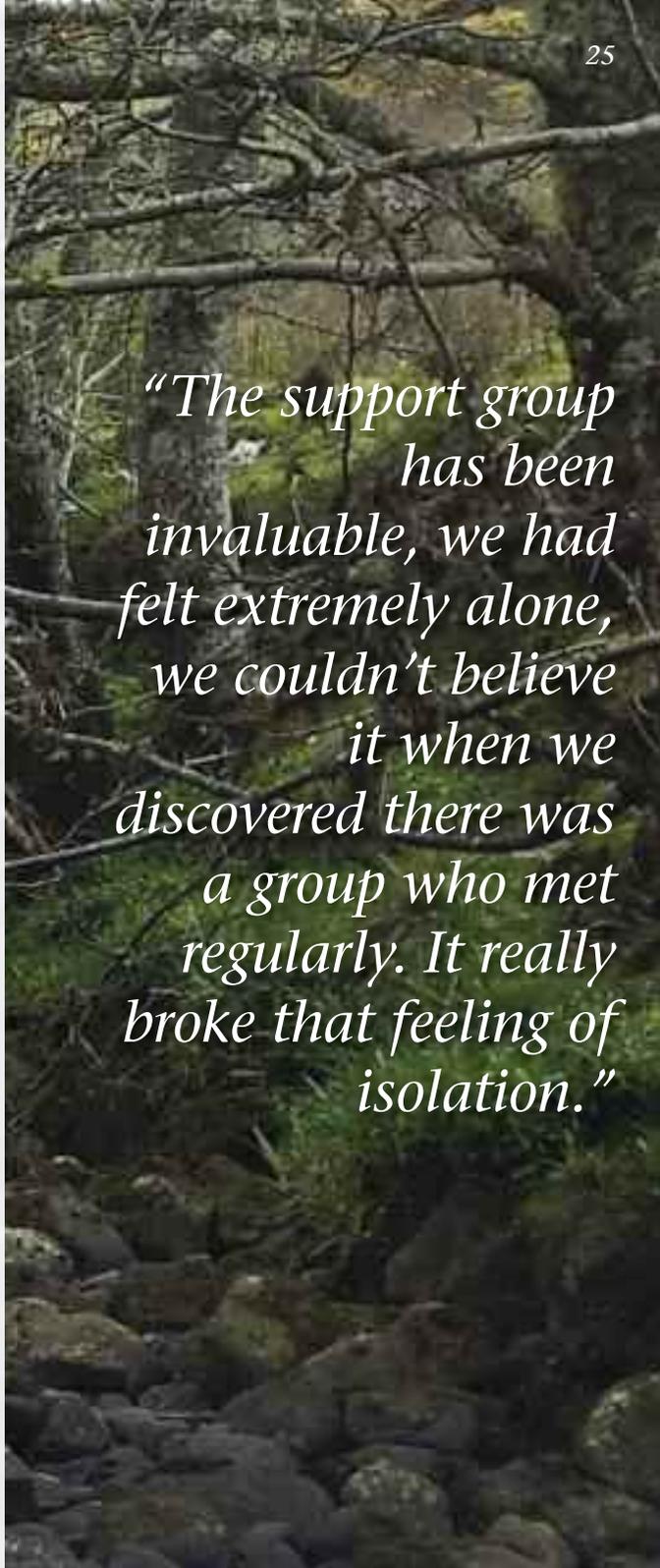
This is a common situation encountered by parents whose child has been abused by a trusted relative or family friend. This decision will have to be made in the best interests of the safety and wellbeing of your child and family. It may be helpful to take time in advance to try to anticipate how the event may go, i.e. the likely attendees, schedule of activities, which aspects of the event may be difficult or the expectations of others. This will allow you to plan how to manage potential difficult moments, and how to ensure that your child is protected at all times. It may be beneficial to enlist the support of a trusted friend or family member in this process. Another option would be to discuss the situation with a professional or in a supportive group, whose members may understand the complexities involved in this situation.

### Is there any way I can keep my child safe from further abuse?

In the aftermath of a disclosure of sexual abuse, parents may be anxious about raising the topic of safety with their child. It is an important conversation to have with children so they can be given some guidelines as to when physical contact is appropriate and when it is not. There are many informative resources available which give parents guidance on how to open up the lines of communication with their children in relation to their bodies, puberty and sexuality. An example of this is the 'Busy Bodies' series compiled by the HSE and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency. This resource comes in written form and also contains a DVD with advice and information on discussing puberty and sexual issues with children in an age appropriate manner.

The Child Abuse Prevention Programme has also published a 'Stay Safe' programme which is aimed at primary school children. The programme aims to give children the skills necessary to enable them to recognise abuse, and it teaches them to tell a trusted adult about any situation they find unsafe, upsetting, threatening or abusive. There is specific information for teachers and for parents on the 'Stay Safe' programme website.

There are also some websites listed which provide information for parents and teenagers about sexual health, wellbeing and relationships.



*“The support group has been invaluable, we had felt extremely alone, we couldn’t believe it when we discovered there was a group who met regularly. It really broke that feeling of isolation.”*

## PART FIVE: NATIONAL RESOURCES

Please note that this list is not exhaustive and it is subject to change.

**Garda Confidential Helpline** Tel: 1800 666 111

**Tusla, Child and Family Agency**

For service enquires in your area phone (01) 771 8500  
email [info@tusla.ie](mailto:info@tusla.ie)  
[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

**HSE**

For service enquiries in your area phone the Information Line  
1850 241 850 or 041 6850300  
[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

**HSE The National Adult Counselling Service (NCS):**

Free, confidential individual counselling for adults who have experienced childhood abuse. This includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect experienced during childhood. The NCS also provides supportive work to family members of those who have experienced abuse.  
Tel: Freephone 1800 235 234 [www.hse-ncs.ie](http://www.hse-ncs.ie)  
**Connect** An evening telephone counselling and psychotherapy service for adults who have experienced childhood abuse. Freephone 1800 477 477

**Rape Crisis Centre**

Preventing and healing the trauma of rape and sexual abuse  
National 24 hour Helpline 1800 77 88 88  
Website: [www.rapecrisishelp.ie](http://www.rapecrisishelp.ie)

**COSC - National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence**

Tel: +353 1 476 8680  
Fax: +353 1 476 8619  
Email: [cosc@justice.ie](mailto:cosc@justice.ie)  
Website: [www.cosc.ie](http://www.cosc.ie)

**Female Genital Mutilation Treatment Service**

offers specialised medical care and counselling (phone or text, confidential line).  
Tel: +353 1 872 7088, 085 8771342  
Fax: +353 1 874 2110  
Email:  
Website: [www.ifpa.ie](http://www.ifpa.ie)

**Ruhama Women's Project**

is a voluntary organisation that works with women involved in prostitution, including those who are victims of sex trafficking and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation.  
Tel: +353 1 836 0292  
Website: [www.ruhama.ie](http://www.ruhama.ie)

**ISPCC**

A children's charity which aims to build coping skills and psychological resilience in children, young people and their families. [www.ispcc.ie](http://www.ispcc.ie)  
**ISPCC Childline**  
A confidential phone line for children and young people  
1800 666 666 Text Talk to 50101 [www.childline.ie](http://www.childline.ie)

**PARENTLINE**

Offers support, guidance and information on all aspects of being a parent. Lo-call 1890 927 277 or (01) 873 3500  
[www.parentline.ie](http://www.parentline.ie) Email [info@parentline.ie](mailto:info@parentline.ie)  
Parentline, Carmichael House, North Bruswick Street, Dublin 7

**CARI**

A voluntary organisation providing therapy and support for children, parents, carers and families affected by sexual abuse.  
Tel: (Lo-call): 1890 924 567  
[www.cari.ie](http://www.cari.ie)

## Private Counselling

For a list of local accredited counsellors and psychotherapists.

### Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

Tel: (01) 230 3536

[www.irishcounselling.ie](http://www.irishcounselling.ie)

### Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy

Tel: (01) 284 1665

[www.iahip.org](http://www.iahip.org)

### Irish Council of Psychotherapy

Tel: (01) 902 3819

[www.psychotherapyireland.com](http://www.psychotherapyireland.com)

## Further Information/Reading

**Busy Bodies:** a series of information booklets and DVDs for young people and their parents. The following resources can be downloaded via the website [www.crisispregnancy.ie](http://www.crisispregnancy.ie) or can be ordered by phoning (01) 814 6282

**"A book about puberty for you and your parents":** This pack contains a DVD and is compiled by the HSE and crisis pregnancy agency

**"You can talk to me":** For tips and advice on talking to children aged 11-15 about relationships and sexual health. This DVD and booklet is available to you by free-texting PARENT followed by your name and address to 50444

**"Tips for talking to older teenagers"** for parents of 15-17 year olds. Free-text TALK followed by your name and address to 50444

**Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children Document 2011** [www.dcy.gov.ie](http://www.dcy.gov.ie)

**The SAVI Report (2002) Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland.**

In association with the Dublin Rape Crises Centre [www.drcc.ie](http://www.drcc.ie)

**Stay Safe:** Published by the Child Abuse Prevention Programme.

This educational programme is available for viewing in your local library. For more information e mail [staysafe@indigo.ie](mailto:staysafe@indigo.ie) or visit the website [www.staysafe.ie](http://www.staysafe.ie)

**"Parents who Listen Protect":** A HSE handbook aimed at promoting good communication in families and communities [www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/services/Children/Parents\\_who\\_listen\\_protect\\_English.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/Publications/services/Children/Parents_who_listen_protect_English.pdf)

**"Understanding and Managing Sexualised Behaviour in Children and Adolescents - Guidelines for Parents and Carers"** Kieran McGrath [www.cari.ie/news\\_publications/publications](http://www.cari.ie/news_publications/publications)

## Websites

[www.b4udecide.ie](http://www.b4udecide.ie) Aims to provide clear and accurate information for adolescents and parents on sexual education, sexual health, pregnancy and relationships

[www.letsomeoneknow.ie](http://www.letsomeoneknow.ie) Aims to increase young people's awareness about mental health and wellbeing

[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie) Independent, youth-led national charity for young people aged 16-25 aimed at empowering personal and social change

[www.headsup.ie](http://www.headsup.ie) Heads UP: Providing timely, appropriate information and support to young people. (01) 2057200 Free text Headsup to 50424 Email [info@headsup.ie](mailto:info@headsup.ie)





