

NSPCC

Someone to lean on



**Advice for professionals
giving therapeutic support
to children who have been
sexually abused**

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

At the NSPCC we completely understand the challenges you face helping children and young people come to terms with sexual abuse and get on with their lives.

The work you do is so important in helping children get back on track - to trust again, restore confidence and regain control of their lives. Whether you're working in social care or mental health, this guide will support you in giving children and young people back their future.

The guide has been put together by NSPCC staff involved in our Letting the Future In therapeutic programme. This programme is based on a comprehensive evidence review, practice experience, and the views of adult and child survivors of sexual abuse.

Letting the Future In was developed to:

- Include a high quality assessment.
- Build strong therapeutic relationships.
- Focus on the individual, rather than a one-size fits all approach.
- Draw on best practice.
- Think of the carer as well as the child.

Some of these tips in this guide are also validated by qualitative research in the evaluation of Letting the Future In. The programme focusses on building strong relationships and child-centred therapy.

TIP

1

Keep your support child-centred



- Be prepared to listen. Don't assume all experiences are the same. You haven't heard it all before.
- Theory is important, but see the bigger picture. You don't need to restrict yourself to specific techniques that may not suit the child in front of you.
- Include children in making the decisions that affect them and be open.
- Confidence and trust need to be built first. Don't expect children and young people to want to talk about their abuse.
- Children don't always respond to direct questions and may not have the words to describe what was done to them or the impact it had.

TIP 2

The bond you form with each child is key to their recovery



“We were friendly towards each other as well... what you call close, as close as a friendship you can have with someone that you have that kind of professional relationship.”

Young Person, 17 years old

- To build a rapport in your sessions small talk is good, so ask what they like and build in activities that interest them.
- Children like routine. You can earn their trust by being consistent. Even the basics, like keeping appointments and turning up on time matter to children.
- At the beginning, you can set agreements about how you'll work together so the child knows what to expect.
- Don't promise what you can't deliver. But, you can instil a sense of hope and optimism. You want them to feel she or he “can help me with this”.
- Ensure the child knows they are believed and that you've followed up on what they've told you. They need assurance they will be protected.
- Establish the rules about confidentiality. Let the child know that everything they say in sessions is kept private; unless, of course, they or another child is at risk of harm.
- Get the child's agreements before you talk to others. Agree what gets talked about, then tell the child about it.

TIP 3

Help carers feel supported and understood



- Parents react in different ways to the abuse of their child, be it denial, anger, guilt or depression. This can affect their ability to support those who need them most.
- Be positive about the potential for children to recover and their essential role now and in the future when therapy ends.
- Stress the importance of believing, supporting and protecting their child.

“I think Mum was very anxious about [the child] coming here. I think she found it very difficult, her coming to another person, and I think Mum felt quite a bit of loss of control. I tried doing a lot of reinforcement with Mum, that she is the main person in her child’s recovery.”

Letting the Future In practitioner

- Help parents understand their child’s needs and give advice on the best approach.
- Don’t forget it is the abuser that is responsible for the abuse not the parent or carer, who may have been groomed too.
- Abuse increases a child’s vulnerability; ensure you have assessed the carer’s ability to protect the child from further abuse.
- You can also refer parents to specialist support that can help them deal with their own issues if needed, for example, mental health.

TIP 4

Understand and use the child's support network

- One thing to do early on is to identify the child's support network. Do this with the child where possible.
- Identify roles and responsibilities of all professionals. Child protection concerns need to be shared and addressed in a timely manner.
- Quickly implement home safety plans and school safety plans – if you don't know how to do these, then ask for advice and support.



TIP 5

Your own welfare as a practitioner is important



- Working with children and carers is a real privilege and you are likely to feel strongly about the work.

“Every client you have is different, you learn something new from them... I suppose in a sense that’s the beauty of the work, it’s that you never ever quite know what is going to happen, what it’s going to be like. And I suppose that’s why I love it really.”

Letting the Future In practitioner

- Professionals need to look after themselves when working with sexual abuse. Even if you’re a qualified social worker, you’ll come across things you haven’t seen before. Good supervision and peer support is vital.
- Set time to continually read around the subject and keep up to date with new learning.
- Don’t be afraid to say you feel stuck and to ask for advice from peers or others in a position to advise.
- Take some time to reflect and to work out what is needed to support the family.

**Thank you to all the Letting the
Future In practitioners working
with children who have been
sexually abused, and who have
helped develop this guide.**