

Creating safer environments for children and young people: situational prevention of child sexual abuse

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Who we are

How we help keep children safe

We work to reach adults and young people to prevent abuse from happening in the first place – and, if it already has, to prevent it from happening again.

Where abuse has already taken place, we work with all those affected, including adult male and female abusers; young people with harmful sexual behaviour; children with concerning sexual behaviours; and victims of abuse and other family members. But we also work with families and with adults and young people where there has been no abuse, to help them keep themselves and others as safe as possible.

We run the Stop It Now UK and Ireland helpline. A confidential service available to anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse, including adults worried about their own or someone else's sexual thoughts, feelings or behaviour towards children. And we run Shore, a website that provides a safe space for teenagers worried about their own or a friend's sexual behaviour.

The Faithfull Papers

We research and evaluate our work to make sure what we do protects children, and we share the evidence with professionals and the public. We want to make best use of our expertise, our data and our insights, independently and in partnerships, to develop new strategies and interventions that help keep children safe.

We advocate for a greater focus on preventing abuse before it happens and for a public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse. The Faithfull Papers are a series of reports showcasing our understanding of what works to protect children to the widest possible audience – to policymakers, journalists, researchers and partner organisations in the UK and overseas.

Around one in 6 children will be sexually abused.

Around one-third of this is carried out by under-18s.

And around 9 in 10 children who are sexually abused know their abuser.

At the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, we work to stop child sexual abuse before it happens.

We're here for everyone who needs us.



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Over the last 20 years, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has used the theory of situational crime prevention to develop initiatives that prevent sexual abuse before it happens.
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Executive summary

Research suggests that child sexual abuse is widespread, but is rarely identified at the time. This is because abuse typically occurs in secret, is usually perpetrated by someone who has a close relationship with the child and is rarely disclosed by the child at the time.

Our current approaches to tackling child sexual abuse mainly focus on responses after it has been identified. This isn't enough. It is vital that we do all we can to stop child sexual abuse from happening in the first place.

Over the last 20 years, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has used the theory of situational crime prevention to develop initiatives that prevent sexual abuse before it happens. These are initiatives which focus on the contextual factors that make sexual abuse more or less likely in family, organisational and community environments, as well as online.

Situational crime prevention suggests that crime is less likely to happen if the following principles are followed.

- 1. Increase the effort needed for a crime to take place.**
- 2. Increase the risk of the offence being detected if it was to occur.**
- 3. Control triggers for those who are likely commit an offence.**
- 4. Reduce permissibility of offending.**

The focus marks a shift away from tackling abuse by trying to identify highly motivated 'bad actors' before they commit a crime and to instead address physical environments, the level and nature of guardianship, and cultural factors. These are usually present when child sexual abuse occurs and can be bolstered to better protect children from harm.

All of our work at the Lucy Faithfull Foundation is about preventing child sexual abuse. This paper looks at a range of projects we have helped develop or run that draw on the principles of situational crime prevention.

- Safer recruitment processes in education that focus on active guardianship in safeguarding and setting standards of behaviour, alongside more effective screening of people who may present a risk of harm to children.
- Targeted training and support to managers in library and leisure settings to help them understand how abuse happens and to look at simple changes to physical environments and organisational culture that can deter offending.
- Work with families where there are risks to children of sexual harm to build better understanding of sexual abuse and how it can be prevented in the context of family routines.
- Shaping online spaces through the use of warning messages and chatbot interactions to disrupt people who attempt to view sexual images of children and signpost them to help to stop.
- Using software to help people who have offended online to be able to navigate online spaces more safely.
- Direct work with communities to look at factors that increase risks to children and environmental adaptations that improve guardianship and safeguarding in the family home.
- Direct work with communities to address environmental factors that contributed to peer-on-peer adolescent sexual violence.

Situational crime prevention to date has been under-evaluated as a methodology to better safeguard children from sexual harm. However, the examples in this paper illustrate its usefulness in preventing child sexual abuse before it happens, and highlight simple messages that we can all learn from and apply in our families, workplaces and communities to protect children from abuse in the first place.

Introduction

Situational prevention of child sexual abuse

Nature and scale of child sexual abuse

At least 15% of females and 5% of males in England and Wales experience sexual abuse before the age of 16 (1). This evidence suggests that the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is widespread and common, although the majority of children affected by sexual abuse rarely disclose until they reach adulthood, if at all.

Child sexual abuse occurs in secret and no environment is immune. Where there are children, there is risk. Children from all parts of society, from all cultures and from all ethnic groups can be

affected and people who perpetrate child sexual abuse come from all walks of life. More often than not a child will be abused by someone they know; someone they trust or someone they love.

The impact varies, but a range of studies show that sexual abuse in childhood is associated with substantially compromised mental and physical health outcomes that can endure into adulthood (2). The human and economic cost of this social issue is considerable. A recent Home Office report estimated the economic and social cost due to child sexual abuse in a single year to be at least £10.1 billion (3).

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Current responses to child sexual abuse

The social impact of child sexual abuse means there is an urgent moral imperative to prevent sexual harm before it happens. Yet our current systems of addressing child sexual abuse generally respond after it has been identified. Typically, this involves protective measures for children after concerns are raised within safeguarding systems and the prosecution of people who abuse within the criminal justice system. This is the starting point for people who have been convicted of a sexual offence to get access to resources and support relating to rehabilitation and risk reduction.

This is an ineffective way of tackling child sexual abuse.

- In 2021/22, 3,010 children in England and Wales were placed on child protection plans under the category of sexual abuse, just 5.9% of all protection plans in place (4).
- In 2021/22, of 103,904 investigations (5) into child sexual abuse offences, 8,197 were concluded with a decision to charge a suspect, just 7.9% of the total number of investigations. These charges resulted in the prosecution of 7,587 suspects and of these, 6,632 were convicted (6).

Our current systems only reach a tiny minority of cases where a child has been sexually harmed. Sexual abuse usually occurs in secret – so safeguarding and police systems often don't know about it (estimates suggest that only one in eight children experiencing abuse is known to the police or social services (7)). Children are usually abused by people they know and trust (8) – so they often struggle to tell anyone at the time. There are huge difficulties around evidential standards to prove that child sexual abuse has occurred – so prosecution and conviction rates are low.

Ultimately, this means that most victims don't get the support they need. It also means that the vast majority of individuals who perpetrate sexual harm against children are not known or convicted and don't get the support they need to stop offending, or to not start in the first place.

This is why prevention that stops children being abused in the first place is vitally important. Situational prevention has a key role to play in this endeavour.

Compared to other social issues such as substance misuse or suicide, the evidence base relating to the prevention of child sexual abuse is still at a relatively early stage. Government inquiries into child sexual abuse generally focus their recommendations on improving processes for identifying harm after it has occurred, rather than stopping it before it has happened. While better identification and early intervention are vitally important, so is the development of strategies and actions that prevent child sexual abuse in the first place.

Measures that have been introduced to prevent harm generally focus on school-based sexual abuse prevention programmes including personal safety activities and Personal Social and Health and Economic (PSHE) education, and while there is good evidence that such programmes increase knowledge of protective strategies amongst children, there is limited evidence that they reduce child sexual abuse (9). Common critiques are that they place the burden of prevention on the child, and are premised on the notion of 'stranger danger' despite most child sexual abuse taking place within a domestic or social context by people known to the child.

Taking a different approach

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation believes that child sexual abuse is preventable – not inevitable. It is a preventable public health problem and although public health models were originally developed for tackling diseases, they have been widely used in relation to a range of social problems, including crime (10).

This involves thinking about different levels of prevention.

- **Primary prevention:** measures targeted at everyone, aiming to reduce the later incidence of problems. For example, awareness-raising with parents about signs to look for in adults that they might have sexual interest in children, or schools-based messaging to children about the importance of speaking to a trusted adult if someone makes them feel uncomfortable.
- **Secondary prevention:** aims to respond quickly when low-level problems arise in order to prevent them from getting worse. These will typically be situations where no sexual crime has taken place yet, but where there are many risk factors and few protective factors. This could involve responding to a childcare professional whose behaviour towards children seems indicative of grooming, a parent putting in place a safety plan after their child has found themselves in vulnerable situations online, or support for someone concerned about their sexual thoughts towards children.
- **Tertiary prevention:** involves a response after the problem has occurred, for example involving child protection, hospital care or the criminal justice system. This would include therapeutic work with children affected by sexual abuse, or intervention programmes for those who have committed sexual offences.

One aspect of a public health approach is recognising that we need to focus on both people and environments. The model of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention can be applied to various target groups including abusers and potential abusers, and families and protective adults, as well as to the environments and situations that children inhabit. Currently, these environments or situations are often overlooked or not considered at all when seeking to prevent child sexual abuse.

Over the last 20 years, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has engaged extensively with researchers and experts in the field of situational crime prevention. While this model is commonly used to prevent crimes such as violence, burglary, vehicle crime and other areas of community safety, it also has significant applicability to preventing child sexual abuse.

It provides a clear theoretical framework that is a good fit with the nature of child sexual abuse and its different forms and contexts. Situational crime prevention measures generally reflect primary and secondary levels of prevention in the public health model, although they may be implemented after an incident has taken place (tertiary prevention).

This paper outlines a variety of initiatives that reflect key aspects of situational crime prevention when used to prevent child sexual abuse, including an overview of some of our projects and activities. These include initiatives that cover four key places where sexual abuse and exploitation occurs: families, organisational settings, online spaces and the wider community. It concludes with some reflections on the next steps required to better protect children from harm through understanding situational and contextual factors related to sexual abuse.

The theory: situational crime prevention and child sexual abuse

Although criminology has typically focused on the psychological motivation of perpetrators and the impact on victims, there is a growing focus on how crimes, victimisation and perpetration link to specific places, and how places – and organisational settings – shape both the commission and prevention of crime.

Situational crime prevention builds on this and notes that for almost any crime to occur, there needs to be a vulnerable target or victim and a willing perpetrator, which results in the crime happening in a particular place, at a particular time. Situational crime prevention focuses on the circumstances surrounding the crime – the settings and contexts in which crime occurs, rather than solely focusing on the characteristics of people committing the crime. The main objective is to prevent crime before it takes place by influencing the environment in which it is likely to be committed.



Crime tends to cluster in particular places and at particular times: antisocial behaviour may take place late night at weekends if a number of clubs and pubs close around the same time. Eck's crime triangle (11) – an essential tool in situational crime prevention – notes that places have 'managers' or people who have responsibility for crime prevention, and that offenders and victims have 'guardians' – people around them who can contribute to their protection and the prevention of crime. In the example of nightclubs closing, the offender's guardians may be peers who deescalate a friend's aggression, while guardians of a potential victim may be those who take responsibility for helping more vulnerable individuals get home safely. Place managers may be law enforcement, club owners or security guards who work together to ensure clubs stagger exit times.

There are some situations and contexts where children are at higher risk of sexual abuse, for example online or organisational settings where adults have lots of unsupervised contact with children. Identifying who is there to guard the child, who is there to deter and disrupt people who might offend and how the environment can make abuse less likely is the heart of situational crime prevention.

To disrupt people who present a sexual risk to children, situational crime prevention methods aim to make it too difficult to commit a crime or reduce the reward so that it isn't worthwhile.

Based on the situational crime prevention approach, Wortley and Smallbone (2006) suggested four broad strategies for preventing sexual offences against children. They emphasise the importance of reaction to situational triggers and opportunities in the immediate environment for the perpetration of sexual abuse, and highlight the need to limit opportunities for abuse, enhance guardianship in high-risk contexts, and address social norms and other contextual factors that facilitate or normalise abuse (12).

Their proposals included:

- 1. Increasing effort involved with committing a crime:** for example, by controlling access to facilities; obstructing people who offend by 'target hardening', such as abuse prevention programmes that make it more likely for children to speak to a trusted adult if the behaviour of someone makes them feel uncomfortable.
- 2. Increasing risk of being caught:** by making it more likely that offences will be detected. In particular, by extending guardianship of environments and young people and reducing suitable targets.
- 3. Controlling prompts:** by identifying and removing situational triggers for people who offend and temptations and provocations to offend, for example, ending permission for overnight trips with a child alone.
- 4. Reducing permissibility:** by clarifying offenders' responsibility for their behaviour and/or removing excuses for offending. This can include countering social attitudes and values that minimise the seriousness or impact of offending.

Situational crime prevention is not only concerned with the risk and behaviour of potential or actual offenders; it also recognises the roles of other parties, the 'guardians' and 'place managers'. It has similarities to bystander theories of crime prevention which, rather than relying on potential perpetrators or victims, target friends, families, peers, co-workers, and members of the general public. It encourages them to consider challenging behaviours or attitudes that may be precursors to sexual violence, or to intervene or reach out for help if they see evidence that a crime is occurring or about to occur (13).

Policies that make sure low-level concerns are recognised and dealt with at some level show how improved guardianship and bystander interventions can help. These policies, typically used in educational settings, cover inappropriate conduct both inside and outside of work that does not meet the threshold of harm or is not considered serious enough to be referred to the local authority. Such policies encourage reporting of signs and indicators of boundary violation between adults and children which may be a warning sign before abuse has happened, and allow incidents to be dealt with sensitively, quickly and proportionately (14).

What might this look like in practice?

Case example one

The professional guardian

John is a residential worker. He overhears a colleague speaking to a 13-year-old girl who was placed at the unit last week.

Later that afternoon, he has a conversation with his colleague, and points out that he felt the one-to-one conversation that he overheard was quite sexualised, inappropriate and out of line with the code of conduct all staff abide by. John did not think that the issue should be dealt with as a safeguarding issue as he could see how the conversation could be seen as being good-natured banter, and he felt that escalating it as a disciplinary matter was disproportionate and would be resisted by his colleague. Nonetheless, John felt confident in being a responsible professional bystander in this situation.

If John's workplace had a low-level concerns policy, this could be actioned in this situation.

Case example two

The concerned parent

Jayne (25) is a lone parent who lives with Amy, her 3-year-old daughter. Jayne has a part-time job and her brother (23) provides childcare when she is working.

Jayne is uncomfortable at the 'rough play' she has seen initiated by her brother. Her brother, who is single, has started joking to Jayne that Amy is his little girlfriend and he wants to buy her nice clothes. Jayne has an uneasy feeling about her brother's interactions with Amy and she calls the Stop It Now helpline.

Helpline advisors talk her through a conversation to have with her brother that is non-shaming, and share with her a template to create a family safety plan. Jayne is encouraged to call the helpline for ongoing support if she needs it.

Case example three

The responsible bystander

Jeremy works as a night porter in a hotel. A man arrives at 11.30pm with a girl who looks around 14 years old and who is drunk. The man says that she is his daughter and they need a single room for the night.

Jeremy issues a room and then phones his manager who advises that he contact the police to talk through the situation.

The practice: situational crime prevention in action

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation has long been advocating for child sexual abuse to be treated as a public health problem, with increased investment in primary and secondary prevention interventions. Alongside this, we have been developing or supporting the development of situational prevention activities that span multiple environments and we see this as a key element to effective child sexual abuse prevention strategies.

Increasing safeguarding in the children's workforce: safer recruitment

It is essential to consider safeguarding when recruiting into the children's workforce. Safer recruitment is one way to help protect children, young people and vulnerable adults from harm. It is designed to help prevent people who pose a risk from working with vulnerable people in the first place, thus making the environment safer. In particular, schools and education settings have become increasingly accountable for safeguarding children when recruiting and selecting staff. Since 2010, it has been mandated that maintained schools in England and Wales must have at least one recruitment panel member trained in safer recruitment.

We played a key role in the original creation and development of [safer recruitment training](#), which looks at best practice that should be adopted when recruiting and selecting adults to work with children in schools and other environments. It sets out procedures and strategies to help people involved in the recruitment process to deter, identify and reject applicants who are unsuitable to work with children. It also seeks to strengthen safeguards for children, with the aim of creating an environment where concerns can be raised on poor or unsafe practices.

The training is divided into four modules:

- introduction to safer recruitment, abuse and abusers in the workforce
- a safer recruitment process
- safer selection
- an ongoing safeguarding culture and responding to concerns and allegations

The training articulates key aspects of situational crime prevention, including the importance of procedures and safe practice after recruitment so that low- and high-level concerns are raised and dealt with.

We are a member of the [Safer Recruitment Consortium](#), a partnership between four organisations with the safety and wellbeing of children at their heart: the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, NSPCC, NASS (The National Association of Independent Schools & Non-Maintained Special Schools) and CAPE. We have been working together, in consultation with the Department for Education, since 2014 to ensure that schools, further education colleges and other education providers have access to high-quality, up-to-date safer recruitment training.

How situational prevention influences safer recruitment

Increasing effort: by 'target hardening' the workplace and obstructing people who offend from gaining access to children through their employment.

Increasing risk: by making it more likely that people whose behaviours are a risk to children or are outside agreed codes of conduct will be identified.

Targeted sector support: supporting Edinburgh Libraries and Edinburgh Leisure

In 2019, Lucy Faithfull Foundation Scotland (previously Stop It Now! Scotland) supported Edinburgh Libraries to make their environments safer by delivering training to help them to promote situational prevention and implement measures that protect children from harm.

The programme was developed as a proof of concept pilot in Edinburgh Libraries with library managers. The training was well evaluated and

there were examples of changes, for example, improving sightlines to children's reading areas, increasing monitoring around the use of computers, and reviewing arrangements around waiting areas for social services adjacent to children's sections in libraries, in local authority buildings that blended social work and library services.

In 2023, the training was developed further and delivered to Edinburgh Leisure, which covers municipal gyms, swimming pools, golf courses, tennis courts, soft play centres and sports coaching. The organisation employs more than 800 staff across more than 30 locations, providing services to thousands of children and adults every week. Leisure facilities also host many sports clubs and activities delivered by external agencies for children.

The training involved four months of careful planning and was designed to address the agency's needs. The training included us reviewing an anonymised list of all safeguarding referrals made over the last two years to understand patterns of concerns. We co-delivered with representatives from the local Police Scotland Sex Offender Policing Unit and the Social Work Sex and Violent Offender Liaison Office.



The training covered:

- an overview of the characteristics of the children served by Edinburgh Leisure
- basic information on how sexual abuse happens in organisational contexts, and in sports coaching and leisure contexts specifically, including findings from key reviews into sexual abuse in youth sporting contexts, highlighting risk factors that were identified by staff (but not acted on) before and during episodes of abuse
- scenario planning – an exploration of what situations are likely to occur in leisure settings in the future
- introduction of ideas around situational crime prevention and how they are used in other settings to better protect children from harm
- how organisational culture can contribute to the tolerance of attitudes, values and behaviours that may underpin abusive behaviour
- use of the [Finkelhor 4 steps model](#) to look at the preconditions of sexual abuse, highlighting internal and external inhibitors that people who offend need to bypass as well as silencing of the victim as part of the abuse process (15)
- consideration of the physical environment of particular leisure venues, for example, are there elements of the layout, building design, or other features that would make it easier for grooming behaviour to go undetected or abuse to occur?
- the organisation’s routine activities, for example, is there anything in the organisation’s day-to-day activities that influence the risk of abuse to children?
- whether the organisation has established effective policies and a workplace culture that prioritises protecting children and where additional changes could improve the prevention of child sexual abuse

Emphasis was placed on the fact that we cannot identify who presents a sexual risk of harm to children based on someone’s appearances, but that there are behaviours towards children that may indicate a risk that can be identified and responded to in a proportionate and effective way. See the YouTube video on recognising warning signs in adults [here](#).

It allowed the 18 managers attending to consider how they could further reduce the risk of child sexual abuse across 14 sites. Each of the managers

developed a set of proposals and ideas regarding their own site, recognising that the action plan for preventing sexual abuse in a gym may be different to that needed in a soft play centre.

Suggestions from the managers included:

- zero-tolerance policy in terms of anti-social behaviour and clearer messaging to customers in relation to this
- using real-life scenarios about preventing child sexual abuse within training and induction of new staff
- detailed environmental scans of each venue to consider blind spots where supervision and monitoring are impaired
- scrutiny of safeguarding processes of organisations that host youth sports activities from leisure facilities
- targeted training for younger staff who may lack confidence in challenging behaviour of adults
- locking down areas not in use
- introduction of processes to better track who was using leisure facilities
- greater and regular presence of staff within each building to act as a deterrent
- developing visible safeguarding officers who can be identified by children and parents as trusted individuals they can speak to if anything worries them, either in the leisure venue or beyond

Since the training, we have stayed in contact with the team at Edinburgh Leisure. They are finalising a situational prevention action plan for each venue and we have committed to providing further training to assist in implementation.

How situational prevention influences training for leisure settings

Increasing effort: by ‘target hardening’ physical environments that children frequent, and obstructing people who offend from gaining access to children within a certain facility.

Increasing risk: by strengthening the guardianship of leisure environments and increasing the likelihood of bystander intervention, making it more likely that offences will be detected.

How can we prevent child sexual abuse?

Create a family safety plan to protect children

If you are concerned about keeping your child safe from sexual abuse, this is your chance to create a safer environment and a support network for everyone in your family. Youngsters are immediately safer when parents and caregivers take the time to learn about sexual abuse and its warning signs.

We talk about risk factors – what puts someone at risk to sexually abuse a child but we must also talk about protective factors – the things a family can do to keep the family safer. Protective factors are the building blocks of your family.

Parents and caregivers who make a commitment to speak up as soon as they have a concern, instead of waiting for certain evidence of harm, play an even more crucial role in a child’s safety. Here are some things that you and your family can do to protect children from sexual abuse:

Know the signs

• “Warning sign” is really just another way of saying “opportunity for prevention” – a chance for caring adults to recognise possible risk and to take action to protect children.

• Remember, the most effective prevention takes place before there’s a child victim to heal or an offender to punish.

Open lines of communication

• Whether talking with a child, adolescent, or adult, about sexualised behaviours or your concerns, the conversation is just a beginning and not a one-time event.

• Let everyone in the family know it is OK to ask questions. It is important for adults to set the tone for everyone by talking about the range of healthy sexual behaviours and speaking up about sexual abuse.

• Remember to teach children that their body belongs to them, they have a right to say no, and that they should tell a safe adult if they’re upset or worried.

• Using some of our suggested books can help you start some really important conversations. However, before you read them with your child read them through yourself first, so that you can judge if the information is appropriate for your child and so you are familiar with the story. Finally, see these stories as a springboard to further conversation, discussion and continued teaching and learning.



If you want to talk about what is happening to your family, call the **Stop it Now! Helpline** for confidential advice on **0808 1000 900**



Situational prevention in domestic settings in Wales: family safety plans

In 2020, Lucy Faithfull Foundation Wales (formerly Stop It Now! Wales) started delivering a project that provides a programme of educational intervention with families identified by statutory or community services as at risk, or as needing early intervention, with regard to child sexual abuse or exploitation. Usually, the families have not met the threshold for formal intervention, cannot access local support, or it is deemed they would benefit from educative intervention alongside other support.

Delivered on a one-to-one basis, the programme is tailored to participants’ needs. Intervention design considers outcomes the participant wants to achieve and delivery style considers any additional needs (for example, learning difficulties or hearing impairment). Referral organisations are consulted throughout to increase collaborative working with regard to the care and support given to people. The programme results in the creation of a [family safety plan](#).

What might this look like in practice?

Case example one

A father concerned about his teenage daughter

Alex (45) was referred to the early intervention service by Children's Services. A single father to four children (two girls aged 13 and 10 and two boys aged 8 and 5), his 13-year-old daughter, Lucy, had been identified as at risk of harm. Alex had contacted the police after finding out his daughter had travelled 40 miles on her own to meet with someone she had met online. After talking to her, he discovered she had also shared sexual images of herself with this person. Children's Services were keen that Lucy received support, and that Alex received some educational work about the risk of harm. Alex was keen to learn how he could help protect Lucy in the future.

We conducted a series of sessions with Alex and, rather than become another service supporting Lucy, we worked with her existing youth support worker to provide advice and information and to ensure the messages for Alex and Lucy were complementary.

Alex was concerned about the trauma his children had suffered through the death of their mother a few years ago. He was worried that without her he was letting them down; he said he had little knowledge of the internet and that he struggled to talk to

his children about personal matters such as sex and relationships. We worked with Alex to help him understand the internet and where the risks lie. We talked about how to recognise the signs in children that something might be wrong, and also what to look out for in adults that may pose a risk. A lot of time was spent discussing the grooming process and what increases a child and family's vulnerabilities. We also helped Alex think through how he could talk to all his children about sex and relationships.

At the end of the sessions, Alex co-produced a robust family safety plan to keep his children safe. This included using a range of resources and books with his children, such as 'Respect, Consent, Boundaries and Being in Charge of You' and 'Real Talk About Sex and Consent: What Every Teen Needs to Know'. Alex said he felt he had the tools and skills to start having age-appropriate conversations with his children about keeping safe. He was able to reflect that at times he had been too busy to put his children first. However, he said he now felt that he has started to have good open conversations with his children, especially Lucy.

Case example two

Children at risk from a family member

Lynsey (36) was referred to the early intervention service by social services. A single mother to three young children (aged 6, 8 and 9), her brother had been convicted in the past of viewing sexual images of children online and had served a short prison sentence. As his release date approached, social services were worried about Lynsey's capacity to understand the seriousness of his offences and his potential risk to her children.

Lynsey completed eight sessions. We discussed the significance of her brother's offences and explored signs and indicators of risk and signs of safety. Lynsey engaged well when looking at the manipulative and grooming behaviours often displayed by individuals who abuse children and came to recognise some of these behaviours in her brother. Towards the end of the intervention, a family safety plan was co-produced with

Lynsey. This included her stating that she would not allow her brother to have contact with the children upon his release from prison, whether supervised or unsupervised, and that this would be reviewed, in time, with social services.

We also worked with Lynsey to help her plan educational work with her children. She outlined how she would speak to them about the PANTS rules using NSPCC Pantosaurus resources, and that she would also set up a safe network, which would include helping her children identify trusted adults they could talk to if they were ever worried or confused about something. In addition, Lynsey committed to talking to her wider family members about her brother and his behaviour, but also about her family safety plan, as she was aware her cousin was close to her brother and also has young children.

Positive outcomes are achieved through an increased understanding of child sexual abuse and risk, and increased skills and confidence. We achieve long-term impact through co-produced family safety plans and proactive and extended guardianship in family settings. These ensure families decide tangible, relevant actions to keep the family safe. Following intervention our staff remain contactable for advice and ongoing support is available through our Stop It Now helpline.

How situational prevention influences our work with families

Increasing effort: by putting in place measures that control access to children and supporting children to tell about any worries.

Increasing risk: by strengthening the guardianship of the family environments and increasing the likelihood of offences being detected.

Working with Somali communities to increase safety in the homes

Between June 2009 to June 2012, we developed an approach to prevent child sexual abuse in a Somali community in London, called Protecting Parents Across Communities programme (PPAC). We commissioned Praxis, a community development organisation based in East London, to implement the project and the NSPCC to conduct the evaluation (17). Praxis hired two part-time staff: a project development officer who was a British Somali man, and a project outreach worker, who was a British Somali woman.

This project did not arise out of a concern that rates of child sexual abuse were higher in the Somali community than in other communities, but in recognition that children from black and minoritised communities are under-represented in official reporting of child sexual abuse (17).

The plan was to work with a non-English speaking community to co-construct with parents and communities strategies to prevent child sexual abuse within home settings. As the project development officer was Somali, it was felt he could use his existing personal and professional contacts to recruit people into the project with a success rate that he would be unlikely to replicate with any other community.

Work was organised into cycles, comprised of planning, research, action and review. The team consulted professionals from the Somali community on where the risks to children might lie and interviewed and held focus groups with Somali mothers to find out more about the domestic life of their children. Based on the insights gathered, the team decided to focus on working with Somali mothers to increase the safety of their children within the home.

Workshops were designed and delivered to 70 Somali mothers, with the following aims.

1. Increasing understanding about abuse, including how and where it happens.
2. Accepting the possibility of abuse at home and in the family.
3. Accurately assessing the risks posed to one's own children.
4. Lowering identified risks by working closely with family members. These included sharing bedrooms and beds; distanced and neglectful parenting; unsupervised access to children; informal caring arrangements (for example, at weddings, classes in Koranic madrasas or when male religious teachers gave lessons to children in homes); abusive boyfriends; gangs and trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Some mothers were able to overcome the challenges posed, and some were not. That is to say, while some were able to accept that abuse could occur in Somali communities and between Somali family members, some found this notion very challenging. While some were able to identify situations that posed a risk and that

could be lowered, others were not. And while some were able to negotiate the lowering of risks, others were unable to address risk explicitly with family members. The evaluation concluded that preventative programmes needed to go beyond informing parents about sexual abuse and help them deal with the anxieties that come with accepting knowledge about abuse.

The project also identified themes relevant to people wishing to engage marginalised communities in child sexual abuse prevention initiatives.

- **Understand the lives of the people you are working with:** prevention programme designers must find ways of understanding particular challenges faced by children, parents and families.
- **Discussions with professionals and mothers helped develop a better understanding of risk:** this helped the team better understand life in the Somali community in London.
- **Be careful with the use of 'insiders':** using insiders to develop a preventative approach with a community group can help, but one needs to guard against excluding those who are not in the social network of the insider.
- **Exclude to include:** while inclusivity is a key value of participatory initiatives, sometimes excluding certain people from the initiative helps include others. (In this project, active engagement with a particular group of clan elders was not pursued after initial consultation with them where they were critical of the project. It was feared that continued engagement might have provoked some to try to actively stop the involvement of Somali mothers.)
- **Be resourced to respond:** prevention programmes need to have sufficient budgets and resources for responding to the preferences of community members.

How situational prevention relates to the Somali project

Increasing effort: by putting in place measures that control access to children and supporting children to tell about any worries.

Increasing risk: by strengthening the guardianship of the family environments and increasing the likelihood of offences being detected.

Community-based situational prevention: the Neighbourhoods Project

The Neighbourhoods Project was led by Griffith University in Australia following the 'Smallbone Report' – a report into sexual abuse in the communities of Aurukun and West Cairns in 2013. The report noted that rates of reported sexual offences (over a 12-year period) in West Cairns were 2.2 times the state average and 6.6 the state average in Aurukun First Nation communities. Elevated presentations of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancies were also recorded by health services in this period.

The Neighbourhoods Project team included experienced practitioners, experts in preventing crime and child abuse from around the world (including from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation), local community members, and community representatives.

Interviews with community members and professionals working within the community identified several issues.

- Physical environments (like parks and paths) were often hidden from view and difficult for police and informal guardians (for example, the wider community) to access, making it easier for concerning and offending sexual behaviour to occur.
- In West Cairns, girls were less likely to report abuse experiences to police.
- Reports of sexual assaults occurring during youth social gatherings and between youth already known to each other.



In consultation with the respective communities, the Neighbourhoods Project designed preventative strategies to improve safety for young people.

The Communities Protect

Aimed at giving community members a voice, raising awareness, re-establishing community rules and norms regarding safety, and mobilising community action, the team held almost 70 meetings with young people, adults, immediate and extended families in West Cairns and Aurukun communities to speak about the safety of children and young people.

Police foot patrols

Police undertook random foot patrols to provide enhanced guardianship and supervision in areas identified as problematic in parks and backtracks.

Designing out youth sexual violence and abuse

Given youth sexual violence and abuse was occurring in public, the team undertook extensive environmental audits of these risky locations to examine ways in which changes to the physical design could increase young people's safety, and shared insights with local, state and federal government agencies. This included increasing lighting and removing some vegetation to enhance line-of-sight supervision, the erection of signage with messaging and expected behaviour, and engagement with local community groups to increase prosocial use of these spaces. Focus in West Cairns was on local parks, while focus in Aurukun communities was school design, including fencing, visitor access and playground supervision.

Friends Protect

Young people and their friendship groups are important partners in the prevention of youth sexual violence and abuse. Friends Protect gave young people the skills to understand laws about sexual behaviour and the skills to intervene safely during risky social situations. Young people who live or socialise in West Cairns had access to this programme, through school and via local youth agencies.

Cape Parents Protect

Designed specifically for parents, the programme helped them to understand laws about sexual behaviour and concerns about youth sexual violence and abuse, and provided practical skills to create safety for their children. All participants reported being able to identify risky situations for their children, and a high level of discussion and problem-solving around useful ways for parents to intervene to protect their children. (Implemented in the Aurukun community only.)

Protect Me

Some young people are more at risk of sexual abuse due to other challenges in their lives including homelessness and previous abuse experiences. Providing these vulnerable young people with extra support and practical safety skills can help reduce their risk of experiencing sexual abuse or violence. Given this, the team worked with a homeless service agency working in West Cairns, to give girls practical safety strategies that they can implement to create safer environments for themselves and their friends.

Evaluation following the interventions showed that the efforts of the community and the Griffith University team did start to make a difference in West Cairns.

- Whilst police data show there are year-to-year fluctuations in reports of sexual offences, other sources of data show a downward trend in youth-perpetrated sexual violence in both communities.
- Examination of rubbish indicative of problem behaviour left in the public spaces used by youth in West Cairns (for example, parks and backtracks) showed a downward trend in sexual and concerning behaviour.
- Young people attending Friends Protect and Protect Me learnt about the laws regarding sexual behaviour and how to keep themselves and their friends safe in social situations.
- Community interviews suggested that whilst there had been improvements, work with young people and their families needed to continue.

How situational prevention relates to the Neighbourhood Project

Increasing effort: by controlling environments and access to facilities; reducing opportunities for abuse, and by 'target hardening'.

Increasing risk: by making it more likely that offences will be detected. In particular, by extending guardianship of environments and young people and enhancing opportunities for guardianship and supervision through environmental design.

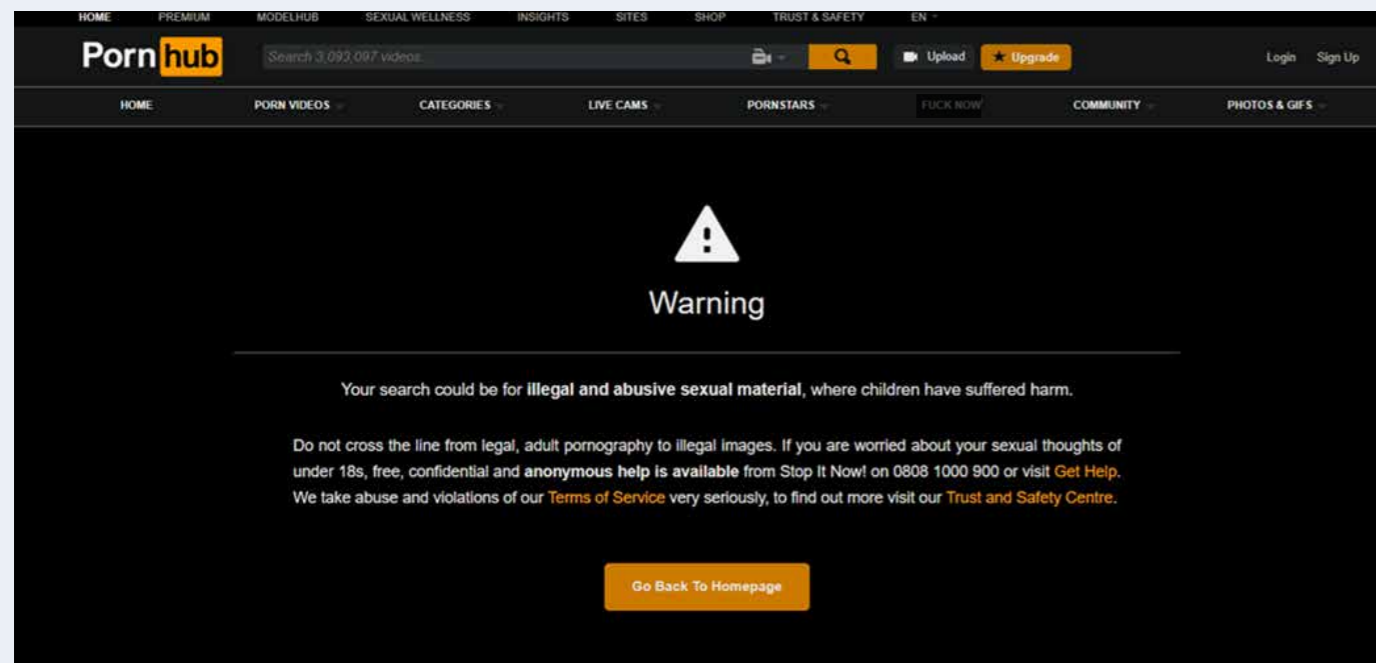
Reducing permissibility: by clarifying standards of behaviour and raising awareness.

Making the internet safer: preventing offending through deterrence messaging

Our experience since 1992 shows that some people who have abused children – or who are at risk of doing so – will reach out for help to change, if they know it is available. Since 2015, we have run annual deterrence campaigns to target people viewing sexual images of children online or engaging children in sexual communication, challenging them to change their behaviour. Evaluation shows that the campaign drives people to our Stop It Now helpline and online self-help resources, and that the majority of un-arrested offenders report at least one positive change in their attitudes or behaviour since engaging with us.

Alongside our effective campaigning to reach a mass audience through press, social media and online adverts, we also pioneered warning messages. These warnings are displayed on Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) splash pages (warnings shown when someone tries to access a blocked URL) and on Google, Facebook and Alyo (formally MindGeek)-owned adult pornography websites (when people make an indicative search for illegal material). Collectively, these warning messages have directed hundreds of thousands of people to us for help.

In 2022, we took this one step further, moving our static warning to a more dynamic intervention. In partnership with the IWF, the reThink chatbot launched on Aylo-owned adult pornography website, Pornhub UK. The chatbot engages in a conversation with users attempting to search for sexual images of children, and signposts them to our Stop It Now helpline and online resources, where they can access support to stop their behaviour. The aim is for the chatbot to deter people who might offend, helping to prevent crimes and reduce the demand for illegal material. This is the first project of its kind to use chatbot technology to intervene when people are attempting to search for sexual images of children and try to help them stop, or not start, offending and thousands of people have engaged with the chatbot. In the first 30 days following the chatbot's launch in March 2022, 173,904 search attempts led to the chatbot initiating conversations with users.



Users of Pornhub are shown a warning message if they enter a search term banned by MindGeek.

In 2023, we started a million-pound project to revolutionise online warning messages and help tech companies develop a consistently robust response to those who try to view child sexual abuse material online. Through [Project Intercept](#) we will experiment with the content, design and deployment of messages across a wide range of online spaces. We will also work to make warning messages the norm, rather than the exception, ensuring that online spaces are hostile to those who are motivated to offend and that behaviours that are precursors to offending are challenged.

How situational prevention relates to preventing offending through deterrence messaging

Increasing effort: by obstructing people who offend and intervening when searching for illegal material online.

Increasing perceived risk: by ensuring people who offend are aware of the illegality of behaviour involving accessing and viewing child sexual abuse material.

Controlling prompts: by identifying and removing situational triggers for people who offend through warning messages in at-risk spaces, such as adult pornography websites.

Reducing permissibility: by clarifying offenders' responsibility for their behaviour and signposting to help to change.

Keeping people safe online: Securus monitoring software

Securus monitoring software was developed with the aim of enabling people who have been arrested or convicted of viewing sexual images of children online to have full access to communications technologies. By not restricting access to the internet, this would potentially enhance their attempts to achieve personal goals of agency, education, employment and intimacy – all important factors when considering reducing risk of reoffending. The software, which we developed in partnership with Securus, provided a degree of monitoring that removed the perception of anonymity and gave the person who had offended a sense of responsibility and accountability for their own actions (18).

Securus was developed originally to protect children in schools from accessing prohibited websites and to curb the use of communications technologies for the purposes of bullying and/or sexual grooming. In 2005, we helped the company develop a package designed specifically for tackling the viewing of sexual images of children.

The software had two key components: a physical, secure server appliance and client software that is installed on all relevant PCs, laptops or remote devices in the home of the person who had offended. The server provided the central monitoring and control database and received data from the client software. The client software monitored the user's PC for prohibited words, phrases and images regardless of their source – whether online (for example, chat rooms, websites, emails and any other online resource) or offline (for example, Microsoft Office programs and USB memory sticks). Any text appearing on the screen was scanned for prohibited words and phrases held on customizable libraries on the secure server.

If the client software detected a match with a word or phrase in any active libraries, it took a snapshot of the PC screen at the time of the event and recorded it, together with the user name, PC name, date/time and other important evidential

information, all of which is then transmitted to the secure server. The software also alerted those monitoring to any access to sites that could be used to bypass or defeat traditional security such as internet filtering and blocking solutions. In addition, an image analysis engine detected potential pornographic images. Lucy Faithfull Foundation staff who were managing these violations could then remotely log in to the server to review the snapshots. All servers were physically tamper-proof and could not be edited, altered or deleted, even during transmission of data.

Following an initial six-month pilot project we conducted in partnership with Surrey Police, participants reported an increased perception of being included and engaged in the risk-management process, allowing them to demonstrate to others both cooperation and positive online behaviour. We provided a monitoring service to police forces and offenders for some years, before forces started monitoring offenders themselves.

How situational prevention relates to Securus monitoring software

Increasing effort: by obstructing offenders' ability to view sexual images of children online.

Increasing risk: by making it more likely that offences will be detected.

Controlling prompts: by removing situational triggers for people who offend, through the fact they know their devices have software running on them.

Reducing permissibility: by clarifying offenders' own role in, and responsibility for, their behaviour.

Discussion

To date, there has not been a strong evidence base in relation to the application of situational crime prevention to the eradication of child sexual abuse. However, this paper has highlighted some of our work and projects that exemplify the principles of this theory in action to better protect children from harm.

In particular, the projects described above:

- make sexual crime harder by increasing professional awareness of the issue
- increase the immediate risks of getting caught, through minimising suitable targets and increasing guardianship
- remove excuses for offending by making it easier for professionals and bystanders to call out problematic behaviour at an early stage
- reduce temptations and provocations to offend, as well as provide people with an opportunity to change

Several of these projects demonstrate how the mundane, every day and micro-level activities of human behaviour and interactions are relevant to assessing safety and reducing risks, and how gaining greater knowledge of them can increase their safety. Several also demonstrate how using the most up-to-date knowledge of ever-evolving technologies – and drawing on staff with expertise in such skills – can produce insights which promote safety in public spaces.

Preventing child sexual abuse is often seen by professionals and the general public as complex and unachievable. The examples in this paper highlight that small changes that are within reach of many of us as parents, professionals and members of the community can make a significant difference.

Proactive guardianship provided by adults is fundamental to preventing child sexual abuse before it happens. In parks, guardians may be wardens, gardeners, and community safety practitioners; in schools, they may be governors, teachers, education policymakers, pastoral staff; and in shopping centres security officers, CCTV monitors and store managers.

We have found this a theoretical model to draw on that can clearly steer our primary and secondary prevention work across different domains (home environments, community settings, within youth-serving organisations and online). We will continue to use it and work with partner agencies and researchers to provide a stronger evidence base showing how these approaches contribute to harm reduction and make safer environments for children to be brought up in.

Recommendations

Nobody wants to think about the abuse of children known to them. But to create safer environments for children, we need to think the unthinkable.

When tackling child sexual abuse, the focus of many professionals is on responding to harm once it has happened. We must do better than this. By publishing this paper, we hope to encourage more consideration of what we can all do to support situational prevention whether that be at home, in our communities or through our work.

Most organisations and agencies can implement some of the examples that illustrate situational prevention in this paper. They are practical, theoretically grounded, and can make significant differences in preventing child sexual abuse.

No matter who we are, there are things we can all do to support situational prevention and increase the protection of children whether that be at home, in our communities or through our work and our primary recommendation is that we all consider this our responsibility and take appropriate actions.

Whether you are a professional working with children, a parent or carer, a volunteer within an organisation that involves interactions with children, a family member where there are dependent children in your extended family, or a member of the community who wants to make a difference in the better protection of children from harm, the following pages have things that you can do.

Situational prevention at home and in the family

Some key principles

Know the signs

“Warning sign” is really just another way of saying “opportunity for prevention” – a chance for protective adults to recognise possible risks and to take action to safeguard children.

Open lines of communication

Whether talking with a child, adolescent, or adult about sexualised behaviours or your concerns, the conversation is just a beginning and not a one-time event.

Set clear family boundaries

Talk about and set clear family boundaries with family members and with other adults who spend time around or supervise the children (e.g., if a child does not want to hug or kiss someone when saying hello or goodbye then he or she can shake hands instead).

Get safe adults involved

Be sure that no one in your family is isolated. Identify one or more support people for every member of the family.

Take precautions about who has access to your child

Be aware of who is paying attention to your children and who their friends are.

Seek help and advice

If you are concerned about the sexualised behaviour of a parent, cousin, sibling, friend, or neighbour, it is important to do something about it.

These are the building blocks of your family and provide a good foundation for [developing an effective family safety plan](#).

Situational prevention in communities

The more difficult we make it for people who abuse to come between children and those who care for them, the better protected children will be. There are some really practical things we can do to help keep children safe.

General understanding and awareness – making sure we have the basics in place

- We all need to have a clear understanding of what child sexual abuse is. [There are resources that can help us do this](#).
- We all need a clear understanding of how child sexual abuse happens. [There are resources that can help us do this](#).
- It is impossible to know someone is a risk to children by how they look. But there are adult behaviours that may be warning signs that a child is at risk of harm. [We should all learn what they are](#).

Think about your particular environment, where risks might lie, and what actions you could take

- Consider where and when your child is most likely to encounter risks – this could be online abuse, within the family, by people known to the family, or in organisational settings (for example, school, youth clubs, sports coaching).
- Think about whether there are any particular settings your child attends where there may be elevated risks. For example, do they go on overnight stays with any groups or clubs?
- If you have identified contexts where there may be particular risks, what can you do to mitigate risk of harm? You might want to know about their safeguarding policies. You can talk to the people running things about provisions they have in place in relation to keeping children safe. You may want to use [resources](#) to speak to your child about online risks.

Situational prevention in organisational settings

When thinking about increasing protection within your organisational setting, you could start with a brainstorming session looking at organisational risks and mitigations. These could span policies and procedures, organisational culture, environmental design and layout. There are many things organisations can do to support situational prevention. Here are some ideas.

Controlling access – consider:

- employment / volunteer screening
- visitor sign-in
- processes in place with respect to those who engage with your organisation who are registered sex offenders and those who are known to present a risk of harm to children, for example, a registered sex offender joining a church congregation. This could include case management where there are concerns and clear assessment and safety planning

Rule setting and compliance – consider:

- clear rules and codes of conduct, especially around personal-professional boundaries, including physical and verbal contact and interactions between adults and children
- guidance about what constitutes inappropriate behaviour
- clarity about rules in changing areas, bathrooms and showers
- code of conduct between children and guidance for off-site activities, online interactions and one-to-one interaction
- implementation of low-level concerns policies

Target hardening – consider:

- staff education or training
- parent engagement
- reducing vulnerabilities of children/adults
- a real commitment to child participation
- cocooning vulnerable children/adults

Neutralising peer pressures – consider:

- anti-bullying programmes
- responsible bystander training

Controlling precipitating conditions – consider:

- identifying and removing triggers for abuse-related motivations
- advertising sources for anonymous support for those who are worried about sexual thoughts and feelings towards children
- staff mentoring and supervision
- responding to low-level concerns and attitudinal issues
- pastoral care – responding to personal problems of staff and volunteers

Utilising place managers – consider:

- engaging and training staff and volunteers
- rewarding vigilance

Enhancing natural surveillance – consider:

- movement around the environment – using routine movements of adults which can provide easy line of sight
- staff supervision of children
- safe physical environments

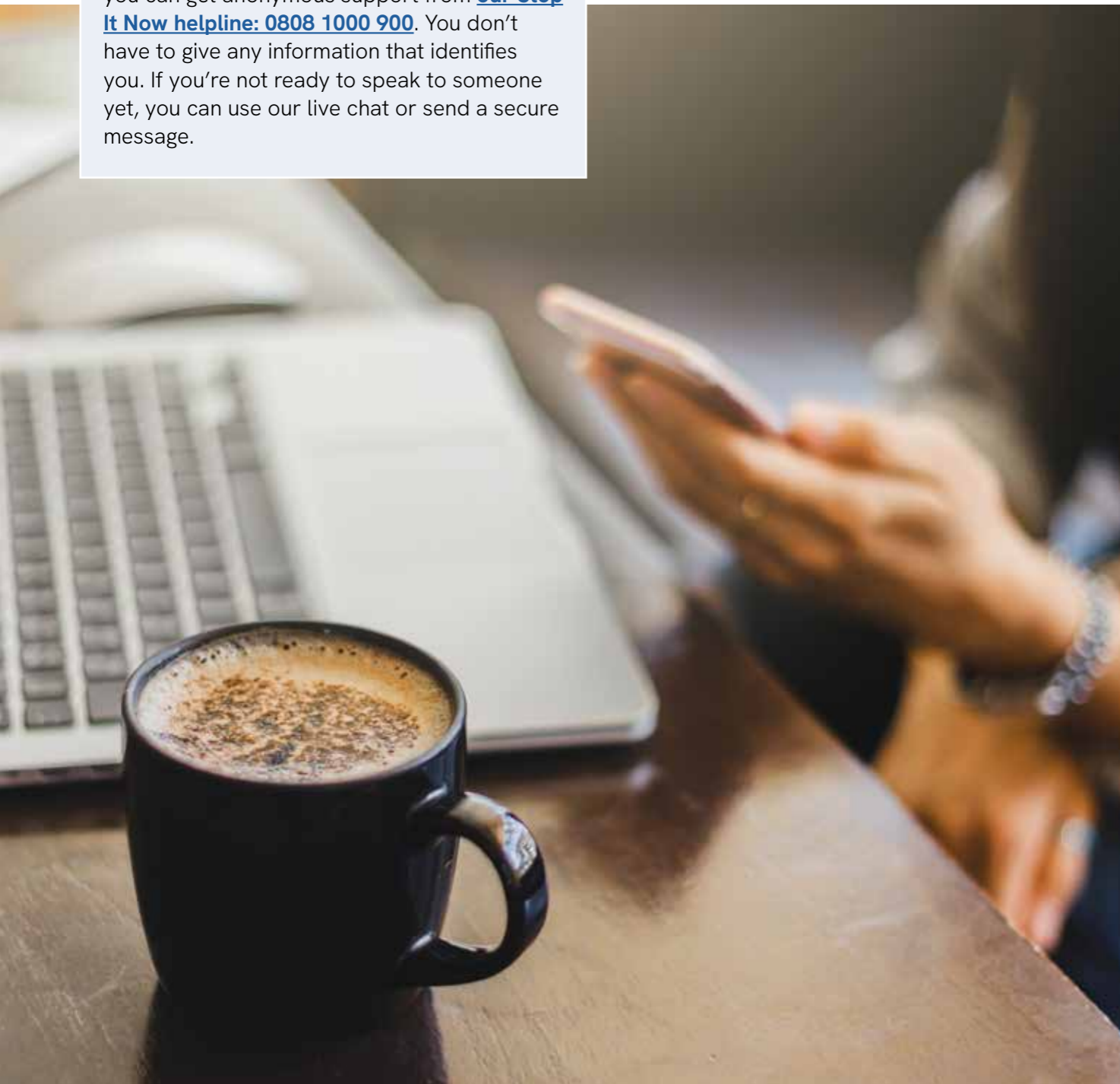
Promoting extended guardianship – consider:

- making prevention everyone’s business
- systems for reporting and recording low level concerns
- quality management processes
- protecting or rewarding whistle-blowers
- staff commitment to child safety, positive environments, child development

If you think something is wrong

It's important to get help if you suspect something is wrong, rather than waiting for evidence of harm. Trust your instincts.

If you're worried about how an adult or young person you know behaves around children, you can get anonymous support from [our Stop It Now helpline: 0808 1000 900](#). You don't have to give any information that identifies you. If you're not ready to speak to someone yet, you can use our live chat or send a secure message.



Suggested reading

[Erooga, M., Allnock, D., & Telford, P. \(2012\). *Creating safer organisations*. John Wiley and Sons](#)

To create a safer organisation, the authors suggest combining traditional screening methods with assertive strategies that can mitigate potential harm and prevent abuse by those who work or volunteer within the organisation. This resource brings together practitioners, academics, and researchers to provide tangible changes, such as situational measures, to promote a safer and more informed culture of appropriateness to help safeguard children and implement measures to prevent abusive behaviour between adults and children.

[Letourneau, E. J., Assini-Meytin, L. C., Kaufman, K. L., Mathews, B., & Palmer, D. \(2020\). *Preventing and Addressing Child Sexual Abuse in Youth Serving Organizations A Desk Guide for Organizational Leaders*](#).

This guide sets out, at varying levels, national, regional and local guidance with actionable considerations for preventing and addressing child sexual abuse in Youth Serving Organisations. Based on two well-established fundamental goals: keeping children safe and placing them on healthy, satisfying life paths with the hope of better outcomes across education, employment, well-being and social connections.

[Smallbone, S. \(2019\). *Situation Crime Prevention. NOTA*](#)

Situational Crime Prevention prevents crime by focusing on the criminal scenario. In 2019, Stephen Smallbone prepared this paper for the NOTA Policy Committee to discuss history, origin, and current practice in tackling child sexual abuse.

[Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. \(2017\). *Preventing child sexual abuse online. Online risk to children: Impact, protection and prevention, 143-162*](#).

This chapter proposes a typology for online sexual abuse prevention strategies, blending preventative healthcare with routine activities. Adopting a comprehensive prevention approach should target offenders, victims, and settings using primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention activities. It argues that it is crucial to consider the vulnerability of children concerning adults and their sexual deference.

[Smallbone, S., Marshall, W. L., & Wortley, R. \(2013\). *Preventing child sexual abuse: Evidence, policy and practice*. Routledge](#).

Public policy responses to child sexual abuse tend to prioritise interventions after the abuse has occurred rather than prevention. This text explores practical ways to achieve this by incorporating existing knowledge on second or trierarchy approaches and applying them to prevention efforts. Integrating clinical and criminological concepts can inform public policy and create a more comprehensive understanding of CSA, resulting in more effective prevention strategies. This book uses empirical and theoretical knowledge to support these ideas and emphasise the need for proactive prevention measures.

[Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. \(2006\). *Applying situational principles to sexual offenses against children. Crime prevention studies, 19, 7*](#).

Wortley and Smallbone discuss the factors that can lead individuals to commit sexual offences against children. They consider both traditional interpersonal factors and the situational crime perspective in criminology. They argue that environmental factors and problematic surroundings significantly create opportunities for offenders to commit such crimes and consider the solutions to reduce harm to children.

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Find out about our Stop It Now helpline

(0808 1000 900) and campaign:

stopitnow.org.uk

Our Shore website provides a safe space for teenagers worried about their own or a friend's sexual behaviour:

shorespace.org.uk



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