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Language Matters

Particularly where adolescents are concerned, language used about sexual abuse can minimise it or imply consent where there was no consent. For example, the BBC reported on 29 July 2019, 'A teacher who had sex with [rather than 'abused'] four of his pupils, including one who became pregnant, has been jailed for 12 years'.

In our inspections, we noted similar misleading language about children. For example, medical case notes stated that a young adolescent was 'sexually active'; when in fact they were being sexually abused by a middle-aged adult.

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It's not OK – so let's talk about it!

Child sexual abuse in the family environment is a very complex area. There is very little reliable data available on the prevalence of child sexual abuse. Latest estimates, for 2017–18, suggest that there were an average of eight recorded offences of child sexual abuse (including rape, assault, grooming and other non-contact abuse) per 1,000 children in England and Wales.

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Society

As a society, we find it difficult to talk about sexual abuse of children within the family environment. The consequence of this reluctance is to reduce our capability and preparedness to protect children from it.

Within families and communities, there remains a disbelief and denial about familial sexual abuse, which means it is less likely to be identified and discussed.

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Children and non-perpetrating parents and family members are not supported well enough.

Agencies are particularly concerned about misconceptions around what support can be offered and when; for example, whether therapeutic support for victims is available during a police investigation or ongoing trial or not. The best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in decisions about the provision of therapy before the criminal trial.

Sometimes, the first sign that a child has been sexually abused is when they begin to exhibit harmful sexual behaviour towards others. This may be towards other children in the family, classmates or other children. In some cases, professionals treated these children as perpetrators of abuse, and focused solely on their harmful behaviours. Professionals did not consider, as they should have, that these children's harmful sexual behaviours may be a result of having been sexually abused themselves and that they, too, may be victims. The abused children are then re-victimised and their needs as victims of abuse are not addressed.

Behaviour

When children have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, often it is solely their behaviour, not the cause, that professionals respond to.

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Familial Sexual Abuse

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Female Abuse

Children abused by a female family member can face higher levels of disbelief from professionals who may also view the abuse as less serious and less harmful than male-perpetrated abuse.

To enable children to disclose, they need access to safe adults with the skills to listen and the opportunity to obtain information and confidentially explore the consequences of disclosure.

Professionals ...

rely too heavily on children to verbally disclose abuse. Children are unlikely to tell someone that they are being sexually abused, particularly when the perpetrator is known to them. Therefore, parents, professionals and the public must understand and know how to respond to the signs and symptoms of child sexual abuse. This includes recognising the signs of abusive relationships between an adult and a child, or between two children, and relationships that lack boundaries. Everyone in society needs to know how to recognise the signs of abuse of a child and how best to respond when they suspect a child is being abused.

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