LET CHILDREN BE CHILDREN

A resource on raising awareness, preventing and responding to child sexual abuse.

PAVEMENT PROJECT GLOBAL

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This e-book was produced by Pavement Project. It brings together materials, presentations and written contributions from partner organisations, all of which have been authorised for distribution.

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THIS BOOK IS AN INVITATION.

Since its beginnings in 2000, Pavement Project has spoken with tens of thousands of children and young people worldwide. We have learned from them, listened to their pain and heard about experiences they should never have had to endure.

In these conversations, children and young people have disclosed sexual abuse. Some have spoken about it for the first time to a Pavement Project-trained practitioner. Many others say they had already told someone they trusted but didn't feel better; instead, they felt worse, blamed themselves, or began to doubt their memories and wonder whether it had all been in their imagination.

Alongside supporting children and young people in dealing with the emotions arising from abuse they have experienced or may still be experiencing, Pavement Project seeks to help adults understand their role in safeguarding children and upholding their rights.

The title of this e-book, **Let Children Be Children**, invites readers to reflect on how difficult it is for a child to enjoy childhood fully when people around them expose them to, or impose on them, situations and responsibilities they are not developmentally ready to manage. This book addresses the serious, painful and complex subject of child sexual abuse in clear, accessible language, drawing on the experience and learning of Pavement Project and specialist partners who authorised the use of their materials.



This resource aims to guide and equip people close to children and young people to support their recovery, so that their future is not defined by the abuse they experienced but can be shaped by opportunities, support and healing.

It invites readers to bring often-avoided issues into the open and face them as part of the journey of life, growth, and agency.

I recommend this resource to parents, relatives, neighbours, practitioners, teachers, pastors, leaders and everyone who wants to nurture hope and care. Anyone who matters to a child can influence the course of their life and open up new possibilities.

This book is an invitation: to reaffirm our hope in life and healing; to acknowledge human vulnerability; to take responsibility for defending those most vulnerable; and to change how we see both the person harmed and the person who caused the harm.

If you want to care for and protect children, read the pages that follow. I hope they help you reflect and prepare for actions that support healing, words that welcome and affirm, and a life that can continue with hope and freedom.

CLENIR XAVIER
Psychologist,
Pavement Project Global Executive Director

WHAT IS IT?

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HOW ARE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE DEFINED?

Definitions vary across legal systems. Broadly, child sexual abuse includes involving a child in sexual activity that they cannot understand or consent to, or for which they are not developmentally prepared. It can include physical contact, causing a child to witness sexual activity, sexual exploitation, and making, sharing or exposing a child to sexual images or videos. The following categories are commonly used:

Sexual abuse: involving a child in sexual activity for the sexual gratification of another person.

Commercial sexual exploitation: using a child in sexual activity in exchange for money, goods, services or any other form of compensation.

Trafficking for sexual exploitation: recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Legal definitions and reporting duties differ by country.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), sexual violence includes any sexual act, an attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, and acts of trafficking or other acts directed against a person's sexuality through coercion. It may be perpetrated by anyone, regardless of their relationship to the person affected, and can occur in any setting, including the home and workplace.

Many girls and boys experience situations such as those described above. Telling someone can be difficult, but keeping what happened to themselves can also be distressing. Abuse may be committed by anyone, including people close to the child: a parent, aunt, uncle, cousin or trusted friend. Although the seriousness of this subject is widely recognised, many important aspects of child sexual abuse remain poorly understood.

A child's body may react physically during sexual abuse, including through involuntary sensations or responses. These reactions are not consent, do not mean that the child wanted the abuse, and never make the child responsible for what happened. Children may feel confused or ashamed about their body's responses, which can make it harder to tell someone. Adults should reassure children that responsibility lies with the person who abused them.

A child may recognise that something is wrong, including from the way the person responsible behaves, yet still feel confused, attached to the person, frightened or unsure how to describe what happened. These reactions do not make the child responsible. As a society, we need to speak openly, learn and understand our role in preventing sexual abuse. This resource focuses on situations in which a child is harmed by an adult or by another child who has greater power, responsibility, trust or developmental capacity.



ANYONE CAN BE AN ABUSER

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People who sexually abuse children do not always fit the frightening stereotype many of us imagine. A person may be popular, friendly, caring or trusted by a family or community and still cause serious harm. Some people who abuse children minimise or rationalise their behaviour to make it seem acceptable to themselves. Understanding this helps us recognise risk without relying on appearance, reputation or social standing. Sexual attraction to children and the act of abusing a child are not the same thing; any concern about a person's behaviour must be addressed through appropriate safeguarding procedures.

Abuse can happen in many places and circumstances, including the home. A person who harms a child may be a family member, a trusted adult or someone in a position of authority. This is why safeguarding depends on clear boundaries, safe environments and adults taking concerns seriously, rather than assumptions about what an abuser looks like.

We need to recognise that anyone may abuse a child. When we imagine that a person who abuses a child must look dangerous, cruel or repulsive, we may fail to recognise risk when the person is a relative, affectionate, helpful, respected or apparently trustworthy.

When we portray someone who abuses a child as a 'monster', we risk treating them as unreal or exceptional. In reality, people who abuse children are human beings and may be part of a child's own family or community. Naming the behaviour clearly and taking it seriously helps us face the risk and act to protect children.



We must recognise that a person may appear trustworthy and still harm a child. Our first responsibility is to listen to the child, take the concern seriously and protect them. The person who has caused harm remains responsible for their actions. They may be offered a referral to appropriate specialist treatment if they are willing to engage, but treatment is not a substitute for accountability and does not, by itself, demonstrate that a child is safe.

Responding to child sexual abuse requires appropriate professional expertise. People who support children should not attempt to assess, treat or manage a person who has abused a child on their own. Pastoral care may provide spiritual support, but it must never replace safeguarding action, specialist assessment or statutory processes.

It is unsafe for an untrained person to try to change a person's abusive behaviour through informal conversations or promises. Prayer, forgiveness or a promise to stop cannot ensure a child's safety. If a caregiver discovers or suspects that their partner is abusing a child, they should seek immediate safeguarding advice and follow local reporting requirements. The child must be supported and protected, and the concern must be referred through the appropriate channels.

It can be difficult to accept that someone we love or trust may abuse a child. Recognising this possibility helps us take a child's words or behaviour seriously, whoever the suspected person may be. **This awareness is one part of safeguarding**; organisations and families must also take practical protective action.



WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS AND CHURCHES DO?

Organisations and churches may feel pressure to accept volunteers quickly, especially when resources are limited. Recruit everyone working or volunteering with children safely. Depending on the role and local law, this may include identity checks, appropriate criminal-record or background checks, references, checking employment history, asking about gaps or reasons for leaving previous roles, and assessing suitability. These measures should be part of a wider safeguarding process, not treated as a guarantee of safety.

Other safeguards include avoiding isolated one-to-one situations where possible, ensuring activities take place in observable and accountable settings, recording and communicating arrangements, and explaining to children in age-appropriate language that they can ask to leave or seek help. Organisations need clear safeguarding policies, codes of conduct, risk assessments, reporting routes and training. These measures protect children and help adults understand the boundaries and responsibilities of their roles.

It may seem that overprotecting children is the only way to keep them safe, but isolating them from adults is neither realistic nor healthy. Children need safe, positive relationships with adults. The aim is not to remove all contact, but to make relationships, activities and environments safer through clear boundaries, supervision, accountability and child-centred practice.

BE THE ADULT AND LET THE CHILDREN BE CHILDREN

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If you know or suspect that a child is being abused, understand your role. You are not an investigator or a therapist, and you do not have to solve the situation alone. Your responsibility is to take the concern seriously, help protect the child and report it through the appropriate safeguarding or statutory channels in your location.

If you know or suspect that a child is being abused, you may face a difficult choice: remain silent to avoid upsetting family members or friends, or take action that could lead to criticism or conflict. The child's safety must come first. Adults must be prepared to act even when it's uncomfortable or unpopular.

Taking responsibility as an adult means not leaving a child to solve the problem alone. A child who has experienced abuse should not also have to carry the burden of protecting themselves or making the report. Do not let fear of the consequences for the person suspected of abuse prevent you from seeking help and taking appropriate protective action.

REMEMBER: NEGLECT IS ALSO A FORM OF CHILD ABUSE.

Follow the reporting procedures that apply where you live and work. Contact the designated safeguarding lead or child protection service, and contact emergency services if a child is in immediate danger. In Brazil, Disque 100 (the National Human Rights Hotline) receives reports of human-rights violations, including abuse against children; it is one national option, not an international reporting route. Share information only with the appropriate people and follow the applicable confidentiality and data-protection requirements.



Figures published by helplines and public authorities reflect the cases reported to them, not the total prevalence of child sexual abuse. Many children do not disclose what has happened to them, and some may not be able to access a reporting service. Read statistics carefully and in the context of how the information was collected.

A concern may be well-founded even when you do not have proof. You do not need to investigate or establish what happened before raising a safeguarding concern. Share what you know with the appropriate safeguarding lead or authority so that it can be assessed safely.

"I once reported a concern after a girl told me that her father was sexually abusing her. The legal process lasted years, and because my report wasn't anonymous, I followed the case closely. At one point, the girl asked me to let the matter go. Her father was putting her under enormous psychological pressure, telling her that he would go to prison because of her. I had moments of doubt, but I believed I had a responsibility to speak up and seek help to protect her."A practitioner's testimony

Reporting a concern can be particularly difficult when the person suspected is a colleague, friend or leader within the organisation. You may face pressure, doubts or criticism, and the process can be long and distressing. These challenges do not remove the responsibility to follow safeguarding procedures. If you are unsure how to proceed, or if the concern involves someone responsible for safeguarding, follow the alternative reporting route set out in the organisation's safeguarding policy. The priority is to ensure that the concern is handled appropriately and that the child's safety and wellbeing remain central.

NEVER DISMISS A CHILD'S DISCLOSURE.

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A child experiencing abuse may know that something is wrong but may not know how to make it stop. Because of a lack of information or because adults have failed to protect them, children may feel alone, believe no one can help, or fear that the abuse will continue forever. Help is available, and telling a safe adult can be an important first step. **What should you do when a child tells you about sexual abuse or gives you reason to be concerned?**

First, listen. A child may not fully understand or be able to describe what has happened. Your response can influence whether they feel safe enough to continue speaking. Stay calm, don't exaggerate your reaction, and don't minimise their distress. Treat the child with respect and compassion, whatever your relationship with them.

Do not promise to keep the information secret. Explain gently that you may need to tell someone whose role is to help keep them safe. Listen carefully and, as soon as possible, make a factual record of the child's own words, distinguishing what you heard from your own observations. Do not add assumptions, ask leading questions or attempt to conduct an investigation. Share the information only through the appropriate safeguarding route.

The key message is to take a child seriously. You do not need to have seen the abuse or have proof before raising a concern. A child may communicate distress through words, behaviour, play or drawings; these signs do not prove abuse on their own, but they should be considered carefully and passed to the appropriate safeguarding professional.

YOUR ROLE IS NOT TO INVESTIGATE OR PROVE WHAT HAPPENED, BUT TO PASS THE CONCERN TO THE RIGHT PERSON SO THEY CAN ASSESS IT AND RESPOND SAFELY.

If you work in a school, community organisation or church, learn your organisation's safeguarding and reporting procedures and the child-protection arrangements in your country. In Brazil, Law 13,431/2017 and related guidance address the protection and specialised listening of children who have experienced or witnessed violence. The underlying principle is relevant internationally: avoid repeated, unnecessary questioning that may cause further distress, and leave formal investigative interviews to appropriately trained professionals.

IF THIS HAPPENS IN YOUR HOME OR FAMILY, REMEMBER:

It can be very difficult for a child to tell someone about sexual abuse, especially when the person responsible is someone they love or do not want to get into trouble.
Do not feel betrayed or angry if a child did not tell you straight away. It may take time for them to understand what happened, recognise that it was wrong and feel able to speak. Thank them for telling you, and reassure them they did the right thing by seeking help.

It can be difficult to accept that sexual abuse has happened, particularly when you believed you had taken steps to keep the child safe.
Listen calmly and do not interrupt or ask questions that suggest you do not believe the child. Do not suggest that they caused the abuse or are seeking attention. Allow them to share what they feel able to say, without pressure. Children may disclose gradually and may feel embarrassed, in pain, or confused. Reassure them that they are not to blame and that you will take steps to keep them safe.

Children should not have to solve these problems on their own, and it is unsafe to assume that abuse will simply stop with time. Adults and organisations have a responsibility to act to protect children.
Take responsibility for seeking help and taking appropriate protective action, even if this brings difficult consequences. Once you know about a concern, do not ignore it or leave the child to manage it alone.

Action is needed to reduce the risk of the abuse continuing and to protect this child and any other children who may be at risk.
Seek guidance from the designated safeguarding lead, child protection service or other appropriate authority so that the child can be protected and supported emotionally and practically. Keep information confidential and share it only with those who need it to safeguard the child. Do not promise absolute secrecy, and do not allow concerns about reputation or stigma to prevent protective action.

It can be especially difficult to accept that the person suspected of abuse is a relative or someone who has been part of the family for a long time.
A child may regret telling someone if they fear what will happen to the person they love, or if that person pressures them to take back what they said. An apology or promise to stop does not make a child safe. Any person who has abused a child must be subject to appropriate safeguarding and accountability measures. They may be referred to specialist treatment if they are willing, but treatment or apparent progress must never be treated as proof that they are safe to have contact with children. Decisions about contact must follow formal safeguarding and risk-management processes, with the child's safety as the priority.



People who abuse children may exploit opportunities when there is little oversight or when they have gained the trust of the child and their caregivers.
If abuse has happened or was not recognised sooner, remember that responsibility for the abuse lies with the person who chose to commit it, not with the child or with those who did not realise what was happening. However, churches and organisations must learn from what has happened and take steps to prevent abuse, including putting effective safeguarding policies and procedures in place. These measures help create safer environments for children and reduce opportunities for abuse to occur.

Sexual abuse can have serious and lasting effects, but it does not determine a child's entire future. With safety, supportive relationships and appropriate care, many children can recover and thrive. Avoid promises about outcomes; every child's experience and needs are different.

Support and recovery are helped when:
The child is protected and reassured that the abuse was not their fault;
Adults listen, take the concern seriously and affirm that telling was the right thing to do;
The child is not made to feel responsible for what happens to the person who harmed them;
The child's routines and relationships are supported where safe and appropriate, without pressuring them to discuss the abuse repeatedly;

These steps can help a child begin to process what happened. Recovery is not always quick or straightforward, and children should be offered continuing support according to their needs.



WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

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Sexual violence is not an easy subject to discuss casually. It calls for thought and care. Although we may find it difficult to speak about sexual abuse, the Bible includes accounts of violation and suffering that can help faith communities confront the subject rather than remain silent.

The account of Amnon's sexual violence against Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is one of the Bible's most painful passages and is rarely discussed in some churches and communities. Tamar was silenced, and families, churches and wider society can also remain silent about sexual violence, particularly when it happens within a family.

Reading the account, we can identify patterns and behaviours that continue to appear in sexual abuse:

Normalisation: Amnon's friends advised him on how to sexually abuse his own sister. The account exposes a culture that treats the pursuit of gratification as acceptable, even where religious principles are publicly upheld (v. 5).

Breach of trust: Amnon asked King David to send Tamar to prepare food for him and serve him in his room, and David agreed. Who would have expected the king's heir to commit such violence against his own sister?

Coercive invitation: "Come to bed with me, my sister" (v. 11).

Disregard for another person's wishes: Tamar made it clear she did not want to lie with Amnon and appealed to her people's values. He refused to listen to her (vv. 12–14).

Use of force: "Being stronger than she, he raped her" (v. 14).

Psychological abuse: After assaulting Tamar, Amnon treated her with contempt and ordered her to leave (vv. 15–17).

Changes in the survivor's behaviour: After the assault, Tamar tore her robe, put ashes on her head and went away crying (v. 19).

Silencing the survivor: Tamar went to her brother Absalom, apparently hoping to be heard and cared for, but he told her to be quiet (v. 20).

Family silence and inaction: King David, Tamar and Amnon's father, heard what happened, but the account records no protective action from him (v. 21).

Sadly, families may still respond to intrafamilial sexual abuse in similar ways. Silence can prevent a child from receiving protection and can allow the person responsible to harm others. Sexual abuse can have serious effects, and the response must focus on safety, support and accountability.

Pavement Project's experience of supporting people has shown how deeply sexual violence can affect lives and how pain may continue long after the abuse. Although the subject is difficult, families and faith communities must address sexual abuse within the family. The biblical call to protect the vulnerable remains relevant. Social attitudes and laws have changed over time, but abuse should never be excused as a family matter or hidden to protect a reputation.

Sexual abuse within a family can cause profound harm, especially to the child who experiences it. Silence is not a remedy. Abuse can happen in any family, regardless of wealth or social position. Families and institutions have moral responsibilities, and legal duties may also apply, to protect children and young people.

THERE IS ALWAYS HOPE.

If you have experienced sexual abuse and recognise something of your own story in Tamar's, remember that God sees what happened to you. The abuse was not your fault and should never have happened. The biblical account does not hide what Amnon did.

People who should have protected you may have betrayed your trust. You are not to blame for what happened, even if you couldn't resist or speak up. What happened was violence; the person who caused the harm is responsible.

You may have carried painful memories for a long time, but you have the right to speak about what happened and to seek accountability. There are people who can listen without judging you. You deserve to be heard without interruption or blame. Remember: it was not your fault.

May God protect your family from harm, especially violence within the family. If something happens, may God give you the courage, wisdom and love needed to respond in ways that protect the person who has been harmed and ensure that the person responsible is held accountable.

God can bring restoration and comfort to those who have been harmed. Healing may take time and may require professional support as well as spiritual care. May God give the peace that surpasses understanding and bring comfort to your mind and heart (Philippians 4:7).

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DO YOU KNOW PAVEMENT PROJECT?

We **support the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of children and young people** affected by vulnerability and trauma, helping them respond to difficult experiences in different parts of the world.

We train practitioners, including social workers, teachers, psychologists, counsellors, and faith leaders, and equip partner organisations with a child-centred, individual activity tool called the **Green Bag**. Developed for children and young people, the Green Bag has also been used with adult family members. It helps people express and work through experiences of trauma and distress.

Our activities began in 2000. The idea emerged two years earlier, when we began researching children's and young people's experiences in different countries. Psychologists and researchers led this work, which helped us understand children's experiences and develop a methodology to support them.

Alongside our work with partner organisations, we promote the **protection of children and young people**, collaborate with relevant initiatives and develop resources such as this one.

We are an interdenominational Christian organisation. We believe that **Jesus Christ** and his teachings offer comfort and hope to people affected by trauma.

TO RECEIVE UPDATES, GET INVOLVED WITH PAVEMENT PROJECT OR FOLLOW OUR WORK, CONNECT WITH US THROUGH OUR SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS.

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