

# Help!



I can be safe

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## I can be safe

It is not often times that we hear that 'disabled children need to be safe'. We largely assume in our society that by sheer virtue of their 'needs', disabled children and young people can remain unharmed. Recent research however (Jones et. al, 2012) has alerted us to the fact that disabled children are three times more likely to be abused than their non-disabled counterparts. Therefore this places a greater need for us to think and talk about the safety of disabled children.

### What is child abuse?

Child abuse occurs when someone causes physical, sexual, emotional or psychological harm or neglect to a child, or places them at serious risk of harm. Child abuse always involves the misuse of power.

NB. We have attempted to use the term disabled children rather than children with disabilities to incorporate a shift from the perspective that sees disability as linked to the child's identity rather than one where environmental inadequacies imposes the disability on the child.

### Why are disabled children more at risk of abuse and of it going unnoticed?

One factor is attitudes. Here are some myths surrounding children with disabilities:

- Abuse of disabled children is not as harmful as abuse of other children.
- It is impossible to help prevent abuse of disabled children.

- Disabled children are more likely to make false allegations of abuse.
- Where a disabled child has been abused it is best to leave well alone once the child is safe.

### How might I identify abuse?

(Source: NAS, 2016)

It can be easy to class any change in the presentation of disabled children as being part of their 'condition'. There

may be some 'typical' behaviours in disabled children and young people which need not necessarily raise alarm bells instantly. These can include poor sleep, discomfort with wearing clothes or busy and loud areas or activities (due to sensory difficulties), echolalia tendencies (repeating what they may have overheard), dietary issues, repetitive behaviours and movements, crying at even slight changes etc.

However the times you should question if a matter is a concerning is when:

- There are sudden changes in the usual behaviours - becoming more aggressive, disruptive or withdrawn, very tearful, wetting the bed etc. A sudden resistance to usual routines.
- Flinching at sudden movements or shying away from touch
- Wearing ill-fitting or dirty clothes and consistent poor hygiene and Severe nappy rash and if it is recurring.
- Distress when being changed or given personal care
- Constantly hungry and thirsty
- Increased sexualised behaviours - excessively above what may be age-appropriate. Use of sexualised language beyond their cognitive understanding.
- Obvious physical injuries such as cuts, bruises, burns, broken bones and pain in genital areas.

It is important to consider the likelihood of any injury in the context of the child's usual behaviours too before raising it as a concern.

So how can my child be safe?

1. Being perceptive and listening to your child is key to identifying abuse. If challenging behaviour persists: As parents speak to the school and record the behaviours and frequencies of them. Review this and along with professional help, devise a support plan to address the concerns that can be followed through across the various settings that your child accesses.
2. NSPCC and the National Autistic Society have devised a very useful tool that teaches autistic children about sexual abuse. It is called the Underwear Rule and encourages parents to talk PANTS with their children, which is as follows:

**P**rivates are private

**A**lways remember your body belongs to you

**N**o means no

**T**alk about secrets that upset you

**S**peak up, someone can help

3. Use Visual supports such as PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), symbols, pictures, writing, communication passports, social stories etc. to be able to find out from them what is going on or to reinforce what you are communicating to them.
4. Your local CAMHS Learning Disability service and organisations like Respond and NSPCC support children and young people who present with complex social, emotional and behavioural needs. Try to get in touch with them for advice and support.
5. Build the confidence of your child by using positive language and praise. Discipline can be demonstrated through positive language and it requires repetition and conscious effort on the part of the supporting adults.
6. When asking them information, don't rush them. Repeat the question if you need to, at a reasonable pace.
7. Developing what is called a Positive Behaviour Support Plan that identifies triggers to behaviour and encourages the child/young person to

build positive personal and social skills through repetition, routines and appropriate visual aids. This plan is a useful tool in identifying what responses to anticipate and offer when dealing with a difficult behaviour or situation.

## Where does the church fit in?

1. Being 'inclusive' isn't enough. Make disabled children feel like they 'belong'. As the theologian John Swinton says, "To belong, you have to be missed. There's something really, really important about that. People need to long for you, to want you to be there. When you're not there, they should go looking for you. When things are wrong, people should be outraged — absolutely outraged that people are doing things against people with disabilities".
2. Encourage disabled children and young people to express themselves within the service.
3. Offer appropriate and planned pastoral support and even do home visits the family to show that you care and are willing to help.

4. Invest time and resources in designating trained individuals to support disabled children/young people, as a means of offering the parents a short break during service.
5. It would go a long way for churches to make special space for children to access when they are distressed or upset. All Saint's Church in Woodford Wells is exemplary in such work (Discoverers). They have developed a fully equipped multi-sensory room on site, with one to one support for disabled children who attend their church.
6. Invite the parent(s) or child or their siblings for a meal or a couple of hours' break.
7. Pray with them. Listen to them.
8. More obvious provisions would be having wheelchair accessible toilets
9. Please try not to stare or shout. It goes a long way for parents to know that they are accepted and being supported.
10. If your church has individuals with skills in British Sign Language and Makaton, encourage them to use those skills! Encourage them to pass those skills on to other workers in the church too.
11. Support families in accessing services within your area such as the Local authority's Disability Teams, Family Information Service (FIS), Parent support groups, Walk in therapy services etc. Offer to look up such services within your local area and share it with the parents. This may be particularly helpful for families from ethnic minority groups, where disability issues can often be very isolating for the parents and the children.
12. Spiritual abuse due to disability - parents and the community may view certain behaviours as emanating from demonic influence or possession and may seek to 'pray the devil out of them'. Disabled children will often feel traumatised at such intervention. Pray for tact and sensitivity in such situations and it may be that seeking medical or clinical advice may be the appropriate response.

At CCPAS we recognise that this is a complex and demanding matter, but often times just talking to someone and seeking help is a great start. Our Helpline is available for such advice, support and sign-posting.

# Key things to take away

Disabled children and adults are more likely to be at risk of abuse than their counterparts.

Disabled children CAN communicate. As adults, we just need to learn how they do.

Look for significant changes in behaviour, presentation and health. It may be a warning sign for additional support and/or possibly protection too.

Seek help, advice and support from professionals early on. Caring can be more effective with their intervention and support.

Make disabled children and adults 'belong' within the church.

Be willing. Be creative. Be committed to loving and caring for them.

## CCPAS

Provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice to churches, organisations and individuals across the UK as well as a 24 hour helpline service. Please also look on our website: [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)



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## Throuh the roof

through the roof is a specifically christian agency working with churches on disability issues founded by Paul Dicken, one of our trustees.



<http://www.throughtheroof.org/>

## Childline

Childline is a 24 hour helpline for children



Tel: 0800 1111

Web: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

## Kidscape

National charity publishing booklets and information on self- protection skills for children and how to keep children safe.



Helpline: 0845 120 5204

Tel: 0207 730 3300

Web: [www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk)

This is one of an expanding series of **Help!** Guides published by CCPAS, many of which are particularly relevant to workers.

See CCPAS website for more details [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)



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