

## **PROTECTING MORE CHILDREN BETTER: IMPROVING PRACTICE WITH BLACK, ASIAN AND MINORITY ETHNIC CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

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This article aims to alert Family Court Advisers and other practitioners in the field to the likelihood that child sexual abuse (CSA) may be part of the experience of children of Black, Asian and minority ethnic<sup>1</sup> backgrounds who they work with, and to offer approaches to best practice that take account of the barriers that exist to the identification of this form of abuse. In seeking to represent children's wishes and feelings, it is important to understand how intensely challenging the common expectation of verbal disclosure is in these situations – especially when some additional kind of evidence is also required. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some Family Courts can operate with an unrealistic expectation of watertight evidence before moving to protect children from sexual abuse. This is risky for all children and young people, but especially so for those from backgrounds where there are additional barriers, both based in their own cultures but also embedded in often unhelpful relationships with services.

The evidence suggests that child sexual abuse occurs at a similar rate across ethnic groups (Bebbington *et al.*, 2011), but also that only a small proportion of CSA becomes known to professional agencies. Taking into account the variations in prevalence studies for England and Wales, the data suggests that at least 10 per cent of children, composed of 15 per cent of girls and 5 per cent of boys, experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, including abuse by adults and under-18s (Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

However, most children and young people from all backgrounds do not tell anyone at the time that the abuse is taking place, and many do not speak about it until they are adults:

*'Children and young people who do tell are much more likely to tell friends or family than someone in a professional role. Official agencies had discovered or been told about abuse in a small minority (under 10%) of cases at the time it was happening, and in around one-quarter of cases at a later date, the CSEW childhood module found.'* (Karsna and Kelly, 2021).

This situation has occasioned severe criticism in relation to services' responses to intra-familial sexual abuse of children by the *Multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment: joint targeted area inspections (JTAs)* (2020):

*'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. Child sexual abuse in the family environment is not a high enough priority. The knowledge that agencies have gained and the systems that have been put in place for dealing with child sexual exploitation are not being applied in the context of abuse within the family environment. Local area leaders across all agencies must provide better training and support for frontline professionals on the issue of sexual abuse in the family environment.'*

Thus, the lack of a positive response by services to allegations of CSA cannot be taken as evidence that such abuse has not taken place and may not take place in the future.

Karsna and Kelly looked further at recent trends in agency reporting. While recent years saw increasing volumes of CSA offences recorded and defendants prosecuted, these numbers have levelled off. A small proportion (12 per cent) of investigations into CSA offences were concluded with a decision to charge the offender(s) in 2019/20; the charge rate has fallen sharply from 37 per cent six years earlier. No data is available on whether there are differential rates of charging relative to ethnicity.

Reports to police have risen considerably in recent years, and yet the numbers of children on child-protection plans for CSA have been declining. There is also huge variation among local areas, with some local authorities recording no CSA in assessments in a year. This cannot be a reflection of abuse within the population – it is most likely that service response is the variable factor here.

### **The experience of children of Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds**

The issues that are prevalent for the majority ethnic population also apply to children in minority populations, but there are additional factors to be understood for these children. Whilst rates of abuse are likely to be similar for all ethnic groups, variations in relation to ethnicity are evident in professional practice. White children are over-represented among children made the subject of a child-protection plan under the category of sexual abuse (and other forms of abuse), while Asian children are under-represented. Health service data also shows Asian children least likely to be referred to Sexual Assault Referral Centres or sexual health services.

### **Improving responses to the sexual abuse of Black, Asian and minority ethnic children**

In order to increase understanding of these issues, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) commissioned a study by the Race Equality Foundation to address knowledge gaps around professional practice in supporting children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds who are at risk of, or experiencing, child sexual abuse. In addition to a literature review, data collection included qualitative interviews with 16 professionals working in the voluntary sector and local authorities in England. All the interviewees had expertise in working with children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds – principally South Asian, Black Caribbean and Haredi Orthodox Jewish backgrounds – who had experienced child sexual abuse. They were recruited through approaches to 41 agencies and organisations known to the CSA Centre or the Race Equality Foundation, or identified through internet searches (Ali, *et al.*, 2021).

The interviewees were asked for their views based on their professional experience; many also drew on their knowledge of their own community of origin, but most had experience of working with children from a variety of ethnic groups. Wider

research was also drawn upon around the difficulties faced by sexually abused children from minority ethnic backgrounds in relation to disclosing the abuse and accessing services (for example, Rodger *et al.*, 2020; Kaiser, *et al.*, 2021). The interviewees identified a number of barriers which prevent these children from disclosing their experiences of CSA and accessing services.

## **Key findings**

### ***Internal barriers within communities***

#### ***Lack of understanding and awareness of concepts such as child sexual abuse.***

Some victims and survivors of CSA may be less able to name their experience as abusive because of a lack of knowledge about sex and consent. Limited access to online sources of information was felt to contribute to this, and that some languages lack words for sexual abuse.

***Pressure to conform to gendered roles.*** Expectations around sexual 'purity' were likely to prompt some South Asian girls and young women to feel shame or fear that they may be blamed for the abuse, whilst boys and young men sexually abused by males may feel conflicted, embarrassed or confused about their sexuality, particularly where there are cultural taboos about gay sex. Furthermore, it was observed that sexual abuse of boys or young men by women may be considered (by the victims and others in the community) less serious than abuse by men. The influence of religious leaders and elders within highly patriarchal cultures was also a common theme.

***Fear of being disbelieved or ignored.*** Even where a child knows they have been sexually abused, victims may not tell anyone because they fear that their parents and community will disbelieve them, or refuse to accept their disclosure. These feelings may be linked to and amplified by ideas of family/community honour and shame. This fear was thought to be greater if the perpetrator held a position of power in the community.

### ***External barriers to disclosure and accessing support services***

***Poverty and insecure immigration status.*** Disclosure of CSA may be particularly difficult in communities living in extreme poverty. Families with an uncertain immigration status are unlikely to seek help or support because they fear deportation.

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