

# From Excluded to Included: Parents as Partners in Child Exploitation

## Authors

Dr Sarah Hall &  
Dr Nicholas Marsh

## Researchers' Reflections

**While it is unusual to open a research report with reflections from the researchers, we felt it was necessary here to set the emotional tone and urgency that these parents' voices demand. Parents are not only grappling with the trauma of their child's exploitation but also navigating complex, and often inadequate, professional systems in their fight to protect them. Their words must be heard and must lead to change.**

Throughout this report, we use parents' own words to centre their experiences. Yet finding language that fully captures what they endure is profoundly difficult. As we listened, it became clear that the emotional and psychological impact is often beyond words. One metaphor that resonated with us both was that of an earthquake.

Exploitation can feel like a seismic event: sudden, destabilising, and deeply damaging. It often arrives with little warning, shaking the very foundations of family life. Like the epicentre of an earthquake, the initial impact is felt most acutely by those closest but the aftershocks ripple outwards, affecting relationships, wellbeing, and the family's sense of safety and identity for months or even years to come.

***“Aliens have snatched him, where has my son gone?... there is so much loss.”***

These are not simply metaphors for pain, they are expressions of profound disorientation, grief, emotional collapse, and the daily work of survival. Parents spoke of living with constant uncertainty, always bracing for the next crisis, never knowing whether safety or danger lies around the corner.

***“Soul destroying, all consuming, toughest thing I’ve ever had to endure.”***

***“It’s just about killed me off.”***

***“Don’t know  
the outcome,  
anticipation  
he’ll be arrested,  
dead, living in  
the unknown,  
absolutely  
terrifying,  
scariest place  
to be, really,  
really scary.”***

***“...we have lost  
our son.”***

Yet unlike natural disasters, exploitation is not inevitable, and neither are our responses. That is what makes this issue so urgent, and what provides us with hope.

Just as earthquake-prone countries invest in infrastructure and preparedness, we must strengthen safeguarding systems, invest in early intervention, and equip children, young people, families, communities and professionals with the tools to recognise, respond to, and disrupt exploitation. Above all, we must confront and hold accountable those whose actions cause these seismic events and fracture the lives of children and families.

***“Living hell...  
somehow you  
cope... carry on.”***

At Ivison Trust, we are continually reminded that even in the face of immense trauma, healing and transformation are possible. Irene Ivison, the founder of the Trust, is a powerful example of how lived experience can drive change. But no one should have to go through this to create better systems.

Each parent's story is unique. The emotions they shared reflect love, fear, strength, exhaustion, and a fierce commitment to protecting their children. The impact of exploitation is unquestionably life-altering, but it also reveals the extraordinary resilience of families navigating the most complex and painful of circumstances. That resilience deserves not just to be witnessed, but supported, honoured, and actively centred in our safeguarding systems.

***“Where there is love,  
there is hope.”***

*We would like to thank all the parents who contributed to this report. Their time, honesty and desire to give something back, in the hope that it will make a difference to other parents, is greatly appreciated.*

**Dr Sarah Hall & Dr Nicholas Marsh**

# Executive Summary

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# Why this Report Matters – Research Overview and Parent Partnership

Parents of exploited children are too often excluded from safeguarding efforts; this report shows why and how they must become partners in protecting their children. Drawing on new evidence from parent interviews, this research calls for a systemic shift toward integrating parent advocates into child exploitation responses supporting the wider goal of recognising parents as key partners in safeguarding.

This study adopts a research-driven, iterative approach to understanding the experiences of parents whose children have been sexually or criminally exploited.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) are forms of child abuse in which children and young people are manipulated, coerced, or forced into sexual or criminal acts, often for the benefit of another person, group, or network. While CSE and CCE are defined in separate government documents, published by different departments, a child or young person can experience both types of exploitation. A significant power imbalance is an underlying feature of both CSE and CCE, often influenced by factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, social status, and economic disadvantage. This imbalance is leveraged to groom and manipulate the child, invalidating any appearance of consent given in situations characterised by exploitation (Department for Education, 2017; Home Office, 2023).

The research process was informed by an initial review of relevant literature, which examined existing frameworks on child exploitation (Hallett, 2013; JTAI, 2016; Eaton, 2017; Fanning, 2019; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Pearce, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022; CSPRP, 2020; Marsh, 2024). Other theories and interventions were also included, such as contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), and the role of parents in multi-agency safeguarding responses (PACE, 2014; Hallett, 2017; Ivison Trust, 2024).

Headline findings from the literature review were shared with parents who have been affected by child exploitation. Providing parents with an opportunity to give their feedback on the findings helped to centre their experiences from the outset, which in turn shaped the research aims.

The research design was collaborative, with parents helping develop the interview questions. This participatory approach ensured that the study acknowledged parents' experiences and that the focus of the research aligned with parents' priorities.

The research was conducted iteratively through 16 in-depth interviews with parents of children who have been exploited. Following the completion of the first nine interviews, an analysis of the data suggested the interview questions required refining to help develop emerging categories. Re-visiting the data part way through the research ensured that emerging themes were explored in greater depth. The findings from all interviews highlighted systemic barriers preventing parents from being fully included as safeguarding partners and examined how policy and practice could be potentially improved to harness parents' expertise.

The analysis of interview data highlighted several recurring themes, including the need for a more trauma-informed and inclusive approach; one that values parents as active partners in child protection, rather than treating them as outsiders or an optional addition.

# Key Insights from Parent Interviews and Research

## Parents Often Feel Excluded from Safeguarding Processes

Parents frequently identify early warning signs of exploitation but report their concerns are often dismissed by safeguarding professionals. High staff turnover among social workers and inconsistent responses across services undermine parental trust in safeguarding systems.

## Exploitation Causes Harm to Entire Families

Risks outside the home (ROTH) directly contribute to harm within families. Exploiters commonly use coercion, threats, and intimidation, negatively affecting the child, their siblings and parents. Parents also report experiencing significant financial hardship, threats from the exploiters, emotional distress, and violence in their homes as a result.

## Intersectional Barriers Limit Effective Support

Racial, gender, and socio-economic biases influence safeguarding responses. Parents from minority ethnic and working-class backgrounds frequently report disproportionate scrutiny and exclusion from decision-making. In particular, parents of Black boys and young men highlight experiences where their children are perceived and treated as perpetrators rather than victims, suggesting the presence of adultification bias. Adultification bias refers to the process by which children, often those from racially minoritised or marginalised groups, are perceived and treated as older than their actual age, leading to reduced protections, diminished empathy, and inappropriate expectations (Davis and Marsh, 2020; Marsh, 2024).

## Individual Practitioners and Charities Play a Vital Role

While statutory organisations and processes can confuse or fail parents, individual professionals from these organisations or working in charities were commended for bridging these gaps. Parents particularly valued professionals and organisations that offered advocacy, consistent support, and practical assistance, viewing these as the most beneficial forms of help.

# Headline Recommendations – What Needs to Change

The following seven headline recommendations highlight the key changes needed to improve responses to child exploitation and strengthen support for affected families. A detailed description of each recommendation can be found at the end of this report.

## 1. Embed Parent Advocates to Support Navigation Across Systems

Parent advocates should be a funded, embedded role within Safeguarding Teams, helping parents navigate the complex web of education, police, safeguarding, and youth justice systems. This support will enable parents to act as informed, empowered, and meaningful partners in safeguarding their children.

## 2. Treat Parents as True Partners

Parents must be treated as key partners in safeguarding, with genuine inclusion in child protection plans and multi-agency decisions. Professionals should move beyond tokenistic consultation towards co-producing safeguarding strategies with families.

## 3. Recognise and Plan for Harm Inside the Home

Exploitation outside the home often creates harm within it. Safeguarding frameworks must assess and address this impact on family relationships and safety, with families co-developing comprehensive, bespoke safety plans to restore a sense of security both inside and outside the home.

## 4. Enhance Multi-agency Collaboration

Safeguarding systems must strengthen multi-agency collaboration by improving information sharing, providing consistent social work support, and delivering timely early interventions. Clearer, more joined-up working will prevent fragmented responses to exploitation.

## 5. Recognise Child Exploitation as a Core Safeguarding Priority

Safeguarding systems must treat child exploitation as a core form of abuse, equal to physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect. This would ensure consistent responses across agencies. Parents often felt confused when exploitation was treated as a specialist area of child protection. Elevating its status will support increased training, clearer pathways, and more joined-up family support.

## 6. Strengthen Statutory – Voluntary Sector Partnerships

Formal partnerships between statutory services and third-sector organisations are vital to providing holistic, continuous support for families. Professionals need joint training to understand each other's roles and capabilities, break down barriers, and prevent siloed working.

## 7. Prioritise Anti-oppressive Practice

All safeguarding professionals must receive training in anti-oppressive practice including addressing adultification bias, building cultural competence, and understanding the intersecting vulnerabilities facing exploited children and their families. Embedding this knowledge will lead to fairer, more effective safeguarding.

# From Exclusion to Inclusion: The Case for a Parent Advocate

One of the most consistent findings from the interviews was that parents felt isolated and unheard within safeguarding processes and criminal justice settings where criminal exploitation was a feature. Many described having to fight to be included, facing exclusion from multi-agency meetings, and struggling to navigate complex safeguarding and youth justice systems without formal support. Furthermore, parents are expected to manage the trauma of exploitation while navigating systems never designed for extra-familial harm (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). The result is fragmented support, placing impossible demands on families already in crisis.

Embedding Parent Advocates within safeguarding teams offers a practical and strengths-based way to enhance family engagement, improve system responses, and build trust across agencies. The role can deliver the following benefits for families, professionals, and the wider safeguarding system:

- Supporting parents to understand their rights and confidently navigate social care, youth justice, police, and education systems.
- Providing parents with a consistent point of contact throughout safeguarding and youth justice processes, strengthening continuity of support.
- Facilitating constructive, collaborative communication between parents and professionals, helping to reduce conflict and build trust.
- Enabling parents to feel safe and supported in sharing sensitive information about their child's exploitation with the police and other agencies.

- Providing emotional and practical support to families, helping to build resilience and capacity during times of acute stress.
- Advocating for parents in strategy meetings, case conferences, and care planning, ensuring their insights meaningfully inform decision-making.
- Enhancing the overall multi-agency response by freeing professionals to focus on direct work with the child or young person, while ensuring parents receive the dedicated support they need.
- Improving consistency and coherence across the safeguarding system by offering a stable, trusted point of connection for families navigating complex processes.

By introducing Parent Advocates, safeguarding teams would enhance parental engagement, improve trust between families and professionals, and ultimately lead to more effective safeguarding interventions. By implementing these recommendations, safeguarding frameworks can become more effective, equitable, and responsive, ensuring that families are not left to navigate child safeguarding and youth justice alone but are actively supported as partners.

# Insights from Research

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## Insights from Research

Child exploitation remains a significant safeguarding challenge in the UK, primarily manifesting as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). While any child can become a victim of CSE or CCE, current data indicates notable gender disparities. Young females are disproportionately represented among identified victims of sexual abuse and exploitation (NSPCC, 2025). Historically, the identification and research surrounding CSE in the UK have faced criticism for their limited focus on the experiences of young white females (Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard, 2019; Davis, 2019). As a result, boys and young individuals from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds may be less likely to be recognised as victims of CSE.

Whilst the scale of CSE across England is difficult to estimate, one of the more reliable indicators is the number of social care assessments undertaken where CSE was identified as a concern. In 2023/2024, social care completed 13,860 assessments where CSE was a concern (Kewley and Karsna, 2025). These figures likely represent the tip of the iceberg. It is also worth acknowledging that since the official acknowledgement of child criminal exploitation in government publications in 2018, the number of assessments related to child sexual exploitation has gradually declined, with the latest figures being the lowest recorded in nearly a decade (Kewley and Karsna, 2025).

The risks for exploited young people extend far beyond immediate harm, encompassing severe physical injuries, psychological trauma, disrupted education, and increased vulnerability to future exploitation or criminalisation. Effective safeguarding responses must therefore adopt an intersectional, multi-agency approach, prioritising early identification, targeted support, and challenging structural biases to protect and support affected children and young people (Davis and Marsh, 2022).

These threats not only devastate the lives of children but also impose significant strain on families. While parents can play a vital role in identifying and addressing the risks of exploitation, their involvement is often overlooked. Historically, safeguarding practices have treated parents more as part of the problem rather than as essential partners in safeguarding solutions (Pike *et al.*, 2019).

Despite decades of research into family-based interventions, this marginalisation persists. Parents possess unique insights into their children's vulnerabilities and strengths and are often the first to notice warning signs of exploitation (Scott & McNeish, 2017; Pike *et al.*, 2019; Thornhill, 2023). Yet safeguarding responses risk fragmentation and ineffectiveness when parents are not actively engaged as partners. This brief review synthesises the existing literature to highlight the importance of recognising parents as partners in safeguarding and examines the systemic barriers preventing their meaningful involvement.

# The Case for Parental Involvement in Safeguarding

Educating and engaging parents in safeguarding is not only an ethical imperative but also a practical necessity. Research consistently demonstrates that parental engagement leads to better outcomes for children, as families provide essential insights into their children's behaviours, needs, and risks (HM Government, 2023; Scott & McNeish, 2017; Munro, 2011). However, systemic barriers continue to exclude parents from meaningful participation. Reports like *Shattered Lives, Stolen Futures* (Jay, 2024) highlight the consequences of side-lining families, resulting in fragmented and ineffective safeguarding responses.

A parent-centred approach, such as Relational Safeguarding Model (Marsh, 2026), fosters trust, resilience, and collaborative safeguarding efforts. As one parent in the *Parent Against Child Exploitation Evaluation* (Lloyd, 2022) observed:

***“When they finally listened to me, things started to change. Before that, I felt invisible in decisions that affected my own child.”***

Similarly, *Not Just a Thought... A Parent's Role in Tackling Child Exploitation* (Barnardo's, 2018) emphasises that involving parents in safeguarding creates a crucial feedback loop, enabling services to adapt to families' needs.

Parents can often feel disempowered by statutory responses to child exploitation. Pike *et al.* (2019) found that *“Parents felt they were left out of crucial decision-making, leading to feelings of helplessness and mistrust in social care services.”* This research underscores the importance of parent-led interventions and policy developments that value lived experience as essential to effective safeguarding responses.

# Understanding Child Exploitation: A Persistent Crisis

The scale and sophistication of child exploitation in the UK has evolved significantly over the last decade. *The Shattered Lives, Stolen Futures* report (Jay, 2024) illustrates the increasing complexity of criminal exploitation, where children are coerced into illicit activities such as drug trafficking and forced labour. Jay (2024) highlights systemic failures in identifying, responding to, and disrupting exploitation, which are exacerbated by fragmented data-sharing and insufficient multi-agency collaboration.

How can such fragmentation be addressed? Parents, frequently positioned as passive service recipients, hold crucial knowledge that can inform more effective safeguarding strategies. The *Pace Evaluation* (Lloyd, 2022, p 2) illustrates the transformative impact of equipping parents with information and support. One parent shared:

*“Without the help and support from PACE, I would not be here. The fear was immense, and I could not see beyond the worst possible outcome. My Parent Liaison Officer sorted everything. I could see light at the end of the tunnel. I was suicidal – without her help, I would not be here.”*

*The Parents and Carers CSE Toolkit* (The Children’s Society, 2018) further reinforces the importance of parental involvement, by highlighting that professionals must actively involve parents in the safeguarding process, recognising that they are often the most consistent people in a child’s life.

The Relational Safeguarding Model (Marsh, 2026) advocates for a partnership approach, treating parents as safeguarding allies; working with parents from a strength-based perspective rather than viewing them as a deficit. This model has proven effective in disrupting exploitation by empowering parents to participate in decision-making. As a parent in the Ivison Trust Evaluation (2024) noted: *“My Parent Liaison Officer helped me create safety plans, involving my child so they had a say. The safety planning is working so far, and I feel more knowledgeable and confident as a parent.”*

## Practice Implications

What do these findings mean for practice? Practitioners must shift their perception of parents from adversaries to allies in safeguarding. Organisational cultures must evolve to ensure parents feel included, respected, and valued in all safeguarding interventions.

Practical steps include:

- Embedding relational safeguarding approaches into statutory guidance (Pike *et al.*, 2019).
- Enabling parents to contribute to multi-agency safeguarding discussions, as seen in the Ivison Trust Parent Liaison Officer model (Lloyd, 2022).
- Implementing trauma-informed strategies that address both children's and parents' emotional well-being (The Children's Society, 2018).
- Statutory agencies, such as the police and children's social care, should strengthen their understanding of each other's roles, responsibilities, and systems. They should promote a culture of shared accountability, as advocated in *Working Together* (2023), by fostering open, reflective practice and engaging in 'mutual challenge' and constructive multi-agency dialogue, where assumptions are questioned and differences are explored in a respectful and solution-focused way.

The Parents and Carers CSE Toolkit (The Children's Society, 2018) provides key strategies for alleviating parental isolation, managing feelings of guilt and blame, and navigating statutory processes. In addition, government guidance increasingly emphasises the importance of involving parents as safeguarding partners, ensuring that interventions are empathetic and non-punitive (HM Government, 2023; DfE, 2012).

Importantly, relational and trauma-informed responses must extend beyond the individual practitioner-child relationship to encompass the whole family and be mirrored at every level of the organisation. Professionals who practice in trauma-informed and relational ways should themselves be supported through supervision and management structures that embody these same principles, reinforcing a culture of care that models the values we seek to provide for children, young people and families.

## Reflection: How Far Have We Come?

Since CSE was formally recognised in national guidance (DSCF, 2009), progress has been made in acknowledging parents as key safeguarding stakeholders. However, systemic challenges persist. Pike et al (2019) found that parents still report feeling excluded, judged, or overlooked. Intersectional barriers further hinder engagement for marginalised families (Ali et al, 2021).

The Children Act 1989 primarily focuses on harm within the home and largely harm experienced by younger children, making it ill-equipped to address extrafamilial exploitation (Firmin and Knowles, 2020; 2022). Safeguarding systems struggle to reconcile their dual expectations of parents – to simultaneously protect children from exploitation while being scrutinised under child protection frameworks. This paradox is evident in cases where parents are blamed for failing to safeguard their children while also being expected to prevent external risks (Thornhill, 2023; Gibson, 2020; Firmin, 2020).

The literature on child exploitation continues to evolve, yet there remains a significant gap in research concerning the role of parents. This leaves many questions unanswered, particularly regarding the potential for parents to act as genuine safeguarding partners within existing frameworks. Furthermore, one must consider whether the notion of parental participation, often lauded as best practice (Working Together, 2023; Lutman-White and Angouri, 2022) remains an elusive ideal. Bain & Harris (2024) assert that *“Protecting children from extrafamilial harm can change the relationship between social workers and parents”* (p. 33). Addressing these complexities is crucial for ensuring that safeguarding efforts fully recognise parents as essential allies in the protection of children.

# Methodology

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# Methodology

This study utilised an iterative, parent-centred qualitative design, which included a rapid literature review, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.

Following initial focus groups with parents, the researchers collaborated with the participants to develop a set of questions aimed at foregrounding the parents' voices and experiences. The questions were also designed to further develop and contribute to the existing body of research regarding the role of parents in the context of child exploitation.

The following are the questions formulated as part of the two parent focus groups.

## Research questions:

Interview questions for the first cohort:

**1.** How might the location of a family (where they live) influence the support and interventions they receive?

**2.** How might a parent's intersecting characteristics/personal characteristics (including gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, professional status, sexuality, disability and neurodiversity) influence the support and interventions they receive?

**3.** What was the first source of support you accessed (family, friend or professional agency), and why was this the first person/agency you contacted?

**4.** Who was your preferred source of support, and why?

**5.** How would you describe the emotional aspect of working with safeguarding professionals and within the safeguarding system (social work, police, education), whether positive or negative?

**6.** Within multi-agency meetings, who had the most and least influence on what was discussed and included in the multi-agency plan (prompts: police, education, health, parents, young people, social workers)?

**7.** Beyond ensuring your child's safety, what else was important to you and your family's wellbeing (work, other children's needs, and other family matters), and how did professionals support this?

## 8. Closing question:

If this article had one takeaway for parents and professionals, what would you want it to be?

# Research Design

An iterative research design was employed to ensure that emerging themes informed subsequent data collection and analysis phases (Bryman, 2016). The study commenced with a thematic rapid literature review that identified key themes related to parental involvement in safeguarding responses in the context of child exploitation. These themes were subsequently presented during two focus groups composed of parents (n=8), where discussions facilitated refining research aims and questions.

Following the focus groups, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with nine parents. The researchers then rigorously analysed the collected data to ascertain its relevance to addressing the initial research questions. In consultation with the nine parents, it was determined that recruiting additional participants and refining the research questions would likely enhance the strength of the findings and maintain focus on the central research questions. Subsequently, a second cohort of parents were interviewed with seven additional parents.

The research questions were refined to specifically focus on the emerging findings from the initial set of interviews. The revised questions were as follows:

Interview questions for the second cohort:

**1.** How might the location of a family (where they live) influence the support and interventions they receive?

**2.** How might a parent's intersecting characteristics/personal characteristics (including gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic background, professional status, sexuality, disability and neurodiversity) influence the support and interventions they receive?

**3.** Reflecting on the beginnings of your relationship with safeguarding services, what were your expectations of the support they would provide, and how does that compare to your experiences (consider social work, police, youth justice, education, charitable organisations)?

**4.** Reflecting on your child's ability to make choices and influence decision-making when interacting with professionals, please share the similarities and differences between your understanding of this and that of social workers/safeguarding partners.

**5.** Please share your thoughts on how services targeted resources and attention on disrupting the exploiters.

**6.** Within multi-agency meetings, who had the most and least influence on what was discussed and included in the multi-agency plan (prompts police, education, health, parents, young people, social workers)?

## **7. Closing question:**

If this article had one takeaway for parents and professionals, what would you want it to be?

Due to the topic's sensitivity, one-to-one interviews were selected over focus groups, ensuring participants a secure and confidential environment (Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002; Mason, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provided the requisite depth and flexibility to explore individual experiences while maintaining consistency across key themes.

## Participant Recruitment and Diversity

Participants were recruited through Ivison Trust, a charity organisation committed to supporting families affected by child exploitation. The recruitment strategy was meticulously designed to capture diverse perspectives, accounting for variables such as lone parenting, ethnicity, race, gender, faith, and socio-economic status. Acknowledging the impact of structural inequalities on access to support services, deliberate efforts were made to ensure inclusivity throughout the recruitment process.

Despite these efforts, only sixteen parents were interviewed due to the sensitive and complex nature of the topic and the dynamic circumstances surrounding family life. All parents expressing interest were included in the study; however, this led to specific gaps in representation, particularly about fathers and racially minoritised parents. The study underscores the importance of future research to comprehensively explore the intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic status in shaping parental experiences (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Bywaters *et al.*, 2020).

The parents were requested to complete an online survey\* which allowed them to share as much about their identity as they felt comfortable.

The table below highlights the data available from the questionnaire.

Category	Details
Total number of participants:	16
Gender:	Female (13), Male (3)
Age range:	40 to 65 years
Ethnicity:	White British (12) Mixed heritage (3) Did not answer (1)

\*See above for a more detailed discussion relating to the online survey.

## Limitations of Third-sector Recruitment

While leveraging Ivison Trust to facilitate access to parents, reliance on a third-sector organisation introduced potential selection bias. Engagement with such organisations may lead to an overrepresentation of parents with higher service engagement and less satisfaction with statutory services. Therefore, the perspectives of those who distrust services or are less engaged may remain underrepresented (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, third-sector involvement can influence participant narratives based on prior experiences. Notably, all interviewed parents had only received support from Ivison Trust during the latter stages of their children's exploitation, often several years after the exploitation started. Moreover, most parents did not reside in areas served by a Parent Liaison Officer from Ivison Trust. They were largely unaware of the organisation until they conducted their own research when seeking support.

Future studies should incorporate recruitment strategies through statutory services, educational settings, and community-based initiatives to mitigate this potential bias.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The initial round of interviews, which included nine parents, occurred from August to October 2024. Preliminary analysis indicated the necessity for further exploration, prompting an additional seven interviews conducted from December 2024 to January 2025, accompanied by refined questions. This iterative approach aligns with qualitative best practices, wherein data collection and analysis are interdependent (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Two researchers independently coded the transcripts and collaboratively refined the analytical framework using thematic analysis. The resulting themes were shaped by both existing literature and the lived experiences of parents, ensuring a synthesis of theoretical and experiential insights. To enhance the validity of the findings, themes were shared with participants for sense-checking, providing parents with an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of their narratives and contribute to the final interpretations (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

# Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research, rigorous ethical safeguards were implemented. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with opportunities provided for them to engage with the researchers and ask questions regarding the study before participation. The research adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by Ivison Trust and the NHS ethics frameworks. Confidentiality was stringently maintained, with all identifying details anonymised. Moreover, measures were instituted to ensure that emotional support was readily available for participants in the event of distress arising before, during or after the interviews.

**Note:**

Ivison Trust was formerly known as Parents Against Child Exploitation.

# What Parents Told Us: Findings from Interviews

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# Findings:

## Experiences of Parents Navigating Risk, Services, and Support

### Overview

This section explores key findings from the Ivison Trust participation survey, which examines the lived experiences of parents whose children have faced risks related to or have been victims of child exploitation. Although the sample size is limited (n = 16), the data provides insights into systemic responses, intersecting needs, and familial experiences across education, care, and support domains. The findings highlight that families affected by criminal and/or sexual exploitation frequently encounter substantial challenges, not only in advocating for their children but also in navigating systems that often misinterpret or neglect their needs. A dominant theme emerging from the data is the disparity in experiences with charity and third sector support compared to statutory services, particularly law enforcement, social care, and educational institutions, which are often perceived as inadequate or detrimental to the family's overall well-being.

### 1. Demographic Overview

The demographic characteristics of the 16 respondents show the following:

- Most participants were female (n = 13).
- Ages ranged from 40 to 65, most were in their early fifties.
- The majority identified as White British, with three participants self-identified as being from a mixed or ethnic minority background.
- One respondent opted not to disclose their ethnicity.
- Most respondents identified their exploited child as male (n = 11), though some data entries lacked clarity. This aligns with broader trends in child criminal exploitation (CCE), where boys, particularly those with additional needs, are disproportionately represented.

### 2. Neurodivergence and Overlapping Needs

The survey suggested a significant correlation between neurodivergence and additional needs among exploited young people:

- Reported diagnoses or suspicions included ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), and anxiety.
- Only three respondents explicitly noted that their child was not neurodivergent.

These findings prompt further inquiry into how unmet or unsupported needs may contribute to the vulnerability of children to exploitation, underscoring the necessity for tailored, developmentally responsive safeguarding initiatives.

### 3. Exploitation Experiences

Parents articulated their children's exploitation experiences as follows:

- Twelve parents reported instances of child criminal exploitation (CCE).
- Two identified cases of child sexual exploitation (CSE) exclusively.
- Two disclosed experiences encompassing both CCE and CSE, with several respondents indicating overlapping forms of exploitation.

This aligns with increasingly recognising intersections between criminal and sexual exploitation, reinforcing the need for service responses that transcend siloed categorisations.

## 4. Education Pathways

The educational trajectories of the young people encompassed a variety of experiences:

- Seven out of 16 of the participants' children attended mainstream educational settings.
- Others navigated pupil referral units, home education, specialised social, emotional, mental health (SEMH), and special educational needs (SEN) provisions.
- Several respondents described fragmented educational journeys characterised by school exclusions, home tutoring, or extended periods of disengagement due to entrenchment in exploitation.

These accounts highlight unaddressed systemic exclusions, emphasising education's dual role as a potential protective factor and an area of harm or disconnection. School exclusion has been shown to increase vulnerability to social isolation, exploitation, and criminalisation (Just for Law Kids, 2020).

## 5. Experiences with Services

Participants evaluated their experiences with key services on a scale from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent), highlighting significant insights into the systemic encounters faced by families navigating child exploitation. While these results may provide insight into parents' experiences of service provision, it is essential to consider that the participants were recruited based on their relationship with, or proximity to, Ivison Trust. This suggests that they sought assistance from third-sector organisations due to their own needs, as well as those of their families, which exceeded the provisions available through statutory services. Consequently, this may introduce a bias in the survey responses concerning levels of satisfaction.

### Police

- Twelve out of 16 respondents rated their experience as Poor or Below Satisfactory, with only one parent providing an "Excellent" rating.

### Social Care (Including Social Work)

- Ten respondents rated their experiences as Poor, with four categorising them as Below Satisfactory. Only two parents rated their interactions as "Satisfactory" or above. This trend underscores the findings explored below, where the safeguarding system is perceived as adversarial, unresponsive, or ill-equipped to engage with parents as protective allies.

### Education (Including Alternative Provision)

- Ten parents rated their experiences with educational institutions as Poor; only four offered "Satisfactory" or higher ratings.

These results amplify concerns regarding exclusion, stigma, and inadequate support within educational frameworks.

### Health Services

- Experiences with health services were more varied, yielding six ratings of "Satisfactory" and six as "Poor".

While some parents reported constructive engagement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or paediatric services, others cited barriers or delays in accessing care.

### Charity Organisations

This sector received the most positive feedback, with twelve respondents rating their experiences as "Excellent" or "Above Satisfactory" and only two rating them as "Poor".

These findings reinforce the critical and valued role of the third sector in providing relational, non-judgmental support to families grappling with exploitation challenges.

### Ivison Trust Support

None of the participants reported receiving support from Ivison Trust during the initial stages of their child's exploitation, underscoring an opportunity for enhancing early intervention and support mechanisms.

## 6. Patterns and Reflections

The data highlights a significant dissatisfaction among parents, revealing that systems frequently misunderstand or marginalise them instead of collaborating effectively.

Observable patterns include:

- The findings from the survey present a mixed picture in terms of statutory services. Survey results suggest that there are high levels of dissatisfaction with statutory service responses.
- Charity organisations are regarded as supportive allies, providing care, attention, and understanding that are often lacking elsewhere.
- Families navigate intricate journeys, with issues such as neurodivergence, exclusion, and criminalisation being prevalent.

## 7. Harm Inside and Outside the Home

Parents expressed concerns about the harm stemming from exploitation, affecting both their homes and neighbourhoods.

- All 16 parents reported suffering from harm caused by exploiters outside their homes, whether through direct threats to them, their children, their other dependents, or their property.
- Additionally, some parents suffered harm within their homes due to their children's behaviour. Thirteen parents highlighted incidents of physical harm and violence directed at them by their children. All 16 participants stated that they experienced emotional and psychological distress.

## 8. Further Impacts

Nine children left their homes for extended periods, involving missing episodes or entering the care system. Three of these children never returned and have completely lost contact with their parents.

Parents reported various negative impacts on their relationships with other children, increased stress on marriages, disrupted sleep, job losses, interruptions in academic pursuits, financial difficulties, mental health challenges, relocation issues, feelings of loneliness, and the loss of friendships, among other consequences.

## What Parents Told Us – “All I ever did was ask for help...”

### Introduction

This section explores the four main findings from the interviews. First, the resilience parents demonstrated, in the most difficult of circumstances. Parents were tenacious in their attempts to safeguard their child, never giving up despite the obstacles and challenges they faced. Part of this involved parents empowering themselves through the development of their own knowledge, pro-actively researching what support there was available and pursuing it. Second, it emerged that parents were not just experiencing risk from outside the home but inside it as well. This was a result of the exploiter’s actions and intimidation but also because of their child’s volatile behaviours within the home. The pressure placed on the child and the trauma they experienced often manifested in aggression towards family members and property. Third, parents felt they faced discrimination due to their location; their race; religion and gender leading to feelings of frustration and perceived prejudicial treatment. Finally, all parents discussed individual safeguarding professionals who had been supportive and kind, as opposed to any positive experiences of the systems and institutions they represent.

### Parents’ Knowledge and Resilience

Parents of exploited children are often thrust into unfamiliar and overwhelming systems without warning or preparation. One parent captured this sudden isolation and disorientation:

*“It was literally me and my son fighting the world... I was the only one that could see what was happening, even though I didn’t understand it. It’s so hard to explain.”*

Despite this, many parents demonstrated remarkable persistence and strength in trying to protect their children – often without professional support in helping them achieve their child’s safety. As one parent explained:

*“So, anyway, I fought and fought and fought... I basically managed to break them (Children’s Social Care) down and they finally got a secure order.”*

All parents conveyed their frustrations in accessing early support when their concerns for their child first arose. They reported observing changes in behaviours, access to money and new belongings, and shifting friendship groups, yet consistently felt excluded from safeguarding processes despite having identified signs of potential harm early on.

*“Initially, I saw the signs before the local authority did, and then, when I am requesting help, they tell me there is no CSE in my area.”*

Lacking formal guidance, parents became experts by necessity, learning the law, policies, and their child’s rights:

*“So, I had to do a lot of reading as well and a lot of family law stuff, because when I complain, I like to complain properly. I read my rights and what her rights are. So, I do challenge the local authority, and I will lay it bare for them.”*

This learning often occurs while trying to access basic support, such as health or education services:

***“I’ve had to fight for the EHCP which initially they wouldn’t give. At that point, we were still waiting for the assessment and diagnosis of FASD, which I also had to fight for funding.”***

Despite these efforts, many feel excluded and dismissed:

***“We’ve literally been excluded from every single meeting. We’ve had to beg for safeguarding meetings.”***

Even in moments of crisis, parents felt side-lined. One described intervening to prevent harm:

***“Police came to arrest him one time. They wanted to run up the stairs, I said, I will go and wake my son up...you going up them stairs is going to trigger my son and escalate this from what it needs to be. He will come with you, and he will comply, but you are not barging into his room.”***

Parents possess crucial intelligence that would be helpful for social workers and the police. Their children often disclose information to them that they withhold from professionals:

***“She came back completely high, and she told us everything... we got names of the people...”***  
***“I even told the police quite a bit of intel... they hadn’t even realised [he] was probably part of this.”***

Yet they felt that their insights were often dismissed:

***“They would not have known anything had I not been telling them everything.”***

***“The NRM, I was told by the police, you’ll never get it. You’ve not got enough evidence.”***

This reported exclusion potentially results in missed opportunities to safeguard and bring about criminal convictions.

Some parents went to extraordinary lengths to gather evidence and safeguarding their children:

***“I got the phone from his hand... I screenshot it all... then let the police have it – and then everything changed.”***

Parents not only hold important information; when well supported they provide safety, care, and emotional stability:

***“The only thing I’ve got is love and care. That’s the only thing that I can give him that they (the perpetrators) can’t.”***

They often risk personal safety to intervene:

***“It was like a trap house... drug paraphernalia... 20 youths walking in and out... we didn’t get access to our child at that point.”***

The emotional toll is lasting and profound:

***“I was a zombie for the first 22 weeks... I still don’t think I’ve processed it now.”***

***“When the exploitation ends, the trauma begins...”***

***“It’s a sad day when your child is safer in prison than at home or in care.”***

Despite everything, many try to offer stability in small, loving ways:

***“I always made sure she washed her hair... I would lie in her bed with her and cuddle her at night-time...”***

These accounts challenge the prevailing narrative of parental deficiency. Instead, they show how parents feel pushed to the margins of service intervention and are often left guessing how best to protect their children. Parents’ lived experience and knowledge should be valued as assets in safeguarding partnerships.

## Rethinking Risk: Harm Inside and Outside the Home

In safeguarding processes, the terms *'risk outside the home'* (ROTH) and *'risk within the home'* (IFRH) are frequently used to distinguish between harm caused by external exploiters and harm occurring within the family. In the context of child criminal exploitation (CCE) and child sexual exploitation (CSE), these terms are often applied to clarify that parents are not the source of harm. However, interview findings suggest that this binary distinction oversimplifies the reality. Families encounter numerous challenges when their child is being exploited, facing threats not only from the exploiters and their associates but also from their traumatised child. Many young people who have experienced exploitation, such as being in a trap house, return home highly stressed and volatile. This often results in physical and verbal violence directed at parents, as well as property damage. The emotional impact on all family members is significant, stemming from witnessing and experiencing this violence. Therefore, parents are not only managing the direct victimisation of their child but are also subject to threats, intimidation, and coercion themselves. Parents described how criminal networks exert control over their entire family, creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear:

***"He didn't have a choice to get out, they knew where we lived. They knew where his oldest sister worked in town. We had threats on me, on the dog... we had people ringing us from prison... we had special locks on the door, lights at the back, lights at the front, and the police had offered to move us as well."***

This account illustrates the extent to which criminal exploitation is not confined to the child but extends to the entire household. The presence of direct threats and intimidation significantly impacts family well-being, creating an environment of sustained fear and instability. Some families even experience physical violence against their property:

***"The house was getting smashed up and there's people in balaclavas everywhere... they attempted an arson attack that night and I phoned, and within minutes I had dog units and oh, I've had armed response before."***

Beyond external threats, the trauma of exploitation can manifest in children's behaviour within the home, leading to further harm. Parents reported experiencing financial loss, emotional distress, and physical violence at the hands of their child, who was often under coercion or psychological distress:

***"He becomes Mr extremely nasty and it's that child-on-parent, verbal, emotional abuse, threats – it's a living hell."***

***"It's all horrendous. I finished up with broken fingers and everything, the domestic violence I experienced was horrendous, I was full of bruises."***

***"Every day there was something. He'd steal my purse, he'd steal my savings, jewellery, phone. He put a hammer through the TV... smashed up his bedroom so many times, ripped the wardrobe doors off, ripped the shelves down, terrified me, terrified the dog."***

These testimonies from parents highlight the dual pressures parents face, not only in attempting to protect their child from external harm but also in managing the complex and often dangerous behavioural responses that emerge as a consequence of exploitation. The presence of violence within the home complicates safeguarding responses. Social workers and family support workers (FSWs) entering these environments may themselves be at risk, raising questions about whether professionals are adequately equipped to manage these volatile situations safely.

Parents frequently report frustration at the response from statutory services. Rather than receiving proactive intervention and support, they often felt blamed for the circumstances they found themselves in:

***“The exploiter had told our daughter that if she didn’t go, we would be killed. She would kill the pets, the hamster... so there were quite a few death threats made to our daughter. She truly believes that this woman, even today, will kill us or try and find us, and the world that she’s involved in is drugs and gangs.”***

The above quote shows how exploiters manipulate not just the child but the entire family, using fear and psychological control to maintain power. Despite parents’ efforts to manage these risks, they are often left unsupported, with safeguarding systems failing to recognise the full complexity of overlapping threats inside and outside the home.

The findings from the interviews challenge the binary of ‘risk outside’ versus ‘risk within’ the home narrative by showing how families affected by exploitation often endure both at once. Parents described living in fear – not only of exploiters but of their own child, whose trauma, fear and distress often manifest as violence and chaos in the home.

These insights point to a gap in current safeguarding responses, which rarely account for this dual exposure to harm. Parents are not just supporting a victimised child; they are absorbing the fallout of that exploitation. Without recognising child-to-parent harm and the relational trauma it causes, services risk misjudging families’ needs and leaving them to manage complex and dangerous situations alone.

# Systemic Challenges in Safeguarding: Barriers to Effective Support

## Intersectionality, Bias, and Location-based Disparities

Parents from racially minoritised backgrounds, single fathers, and those in working-class communities described being judged not on their circumstances but on aspects of their identity. Several felt their race, gender, and/or class directly shaped how professionals engaged with them:

*“Do you know I don’t think I’ve had one Black or Asian policeman here. So, there was no one person he could recognise himself in, not one he could actually talk to him, if you know what I mean.”*

*“We were judged by the colour of our skin.”*

Gendered assumptions also played a role in shaping safeguarding responses:

*“Being a male (single parent), I felt that I could not express myself, get upset or angry, I think a lot of the social workers were used to working with mums.”*

*“The social worker who did the assessment told me I couldn’t expect to have a bond with him (her son, CCE) but I could expect to have a bond with my daughter because we can go to the nail salon together.”*

Geographical location also shaped the nature and urgency of responses:

*“The police who came from the location where she had been exploited (a different local authority) interviewed her for 20 minutes and they were not interested, not at all. And I thought was that in our area this (the exploitation) would be a big deal. In the other local authority (where she had been exploited) this is really insignificant compared to what else they are dealing with.”*

*“I think if I lived in a different area – it’s a very working-class area I live in – if I lived in a different area, I don’t think that would have happened at all.”*

The experiences shared by parents suggest a pattern of safeguarding responses, where professional disengagement, fragmented multi-agency coordination, and limited understanding of exploitation create significant barriers to providing effective support. Parents felt consistently excluded from decisions, even when they held vital insights and intelligence. Instead of being treated as safeguarding partners, they were often marginalised, with their concerns met with passivity or blame. The reported lack of early intervention and the tendency for services to react only when harm escalated possibly reflects a system unable to effectively respond to and manage the scale and nature of child exploitation.

A particularly critical insight from this data is the need for safeguarding approaches that are both responsive and intersectional. Parents from racially minoritised backgrounds, working-class families, and non-traditional caregiving roles (such as single fathers) described being judged through the lens of identity rather than need. The influence of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on professional perceptions and decisions cannot be overlooked. Assumptions about parenting, misrecognition of cultural experiences, and disparities based on location contribute to unequal access to support and inconsistent intervention thresholds. Without an intersectional lens, professionals risk reinforcing existing inequalities, misinterpreting family dynamics, and overlooking key risks and resources.

The experiences shared by parents suggest persistent and systemic challenges within safeguarding processes. Across all interviews, a lack of trust in multi-agency working was clear. Parents described being excluded from decision-making, their insights disregarded, and their concerns met with delay, dismissal, or inaction. These findings suggest that barriers to effective intervention are not isolated incidents but rooted in deeper structural failings.

### **Failures in Multi-agency Working**

Parents frequently reported poor coordination between services, especially among schools, police, and social care. Early signs of exploitation were often ignored, and professionals appeared reluctant to intervene meaningfully.

*“I thought they (service) would be more knowledgeable.”*

*“With school, they just wanted him off the premises, they didn’t want it to be their problem at all, just get rid of him... without addressing the problem or supporting him.”*

*“I remember the police telling me, your son is just low-hanging fruit.”*

These examples reflect a pattern of reactive rather than preventative safeguarding, where complexity leads to withdrawal rather than engagement.

### **Inconsistencies in Social Work Responses**

Instability within social work teams further undermined support. Parents described high staff turnover, lack of specialist exploitation knowledge, repeated assessments, and minimal continuity. The impact on children and the broader families was reported as profound:

*“You’re on your fourth social worker, and everybody comes and starts at the beginning, and they (her children) were like saying, Mum, we can’t talk anymore because it doesn’t make any difference.”*

A lack of professional understanding around exploitation, particularly county lines, further weakened trust:

*“The safeguarding social worker clearly does not understand county lines.”*

Decisions about placement were also highlighted as unsafe and poorly informed, with parents excluded from key discussions:

*“I said (at a Children’s Social Care meeting), how can you put him in this place where his abusers are from? And that is on his safety plan. That’s an exclusion zone.”*

*“Everything we know as parents that we’ve tried to share with the authorities, we’ve literally been excluded from every single meeting. We’ve had to beg for safeguarding meetings.”*

### Barriers to Intelligence Sharing

Parents described holding valuable intelligence about perpetrators and risks, but their attempts to share this information were frequently ignored:

*“The other thing I found frustrating... giving intel to police... where she is, where she’s been, which individual she was with, CCTV of cars pulling up outside the house, and they wouldn’t take that information.”*

This failure to act on parental insight reflects a missed opportunity to use families as active safeguarding partners.

### Defeatist Attitudes from Professionals

Parents also described encountering passive and defeatist attitudes, where professionals appeared resigned to waiting for crises rather than preventing them:

*“In the beginning they say, oh nothing happens overnight. But when I’m talking about it now, it’s like five years. I’m not talking about overnight anymore. I’m talking five years.”*

*“My ex, my very first social worker, said to me, ‘oh mum, you are trying your best, they (her son) just have to hit the wall, they just have to hit the wall and they realise’, but ever since he said that, I’m just thinking, what is that wall he is talking about? It’s giving me anxiety, like panicking, like what could it be...?”*

Rather than offering clear plans for support or protection, some professionals appeared to wait for harm to escalate before acting.

### Positive Experiences that Parents Identified

Although parents’ experiences of services were generally negative, positive feedback was given about particular agencies and individuals.

*“The children’s department and the A&E in the hospital were really good every time.”*

*“He (police officer) was just brilliant and he made me feel really safe feeding in intel”.*

*“One of the CAMHS workers... and this is where it is down to individuals, not services. I have been lucky that there have been some good individuals employed within them services”.*

Parents clearly valued workers who they perceived had gone above and beyond for them and their child.

*“She’s a social worker. She went to the property (where the child was in a trap house) because she couldn’t get the social workers to go and do a welfare check (it was a different local authority). She was part-time, worked three days a week and every week she went to see our daughter until she came home... she saved her life”.*

*“The teachers (at alternative provision) were brilliant... there were these three women and if he didn’t go in, they’d come out and find him.”*

*“I can’t put into words how much I owe to the charities; how helpful they’ve been”.*

The commitment of those professionals, who advocated and supported parents, clearly meant a lot to parents and was greatly appreciated.

## Conclusion

The findings highlight the complex and multi-faceted nature of child exploitation, where safeguarding professionals, parents, and young people all navigate a landscape shaped by systemic challenges, resource constraints, and the evolving tactics of exploiters. Parents play a crucial yet often unrecognised role in identifying early signs of exploitation and advocating for their child's protection. However, many report exclusion from safeguarding processes, a lack of professional understanding of exploitation, and inconsistent responses across agencies.

At the same time, professionals operate within systems that are often overstretched, reactive rather than preventative, and constrained by policy limitations. The complexity of child exploitation – where young people may be coerced into secrecy, distrust professionals, or become entangled in criminal activity – further complicates effective intervention. Many safeguarding practitioners work tirelessly to protect young people, yet face systemic barriers such as high caseloads, gaps in specialist training, and the challenge of balancing child-centred practice with legal and procedural frameworks.

Despite these structural challenges, the findings suggest that more effective safeguarding outcomes emerge when professionals work collaboratively with parents rather than viewing them as passive recipients of support. While systemic issues persist, individual professionals – whether social workers, police officers, educators, or voluntary sector workers – have been instrumental in bridging these gaps, demonstrating the value of proactive, relationship-based engagement.

Safety planning with parents and young people needs to consider the harm that is happening in the home as a direct consequence of the exploitation happening outside the home. The confluence between these harms needs to be identified, assessed and intervened with so that parents and families can feel safer in the home and outside it. If parents know that their family's overall safety is being taken seriously and responded to, it may contribute to increased trust in services and bridge the gaps identified in this research. Particularly, when it comes to giving information to the police about exploiters. Moving forward, safeguarding frameworks must evolve to incorporate the lived expertise of parents as a critical component of child protection. This requires a shift in practice towards more inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive safeguarding structures. Equipping professionals with specialist training on child exploitation, ensuring consistent multi-agency working, and embedding parent-professional partnerships into safeguarding practice will help create a more effective and holistic response. Rather than positioning parents and professionals in opposition, a shared approach – grounded in mutual trust and co-production – offers the best chance of disrupting exploitation and providing meaningful support to affected families.

In addition, local authority children's services are increasingly embracing a contextual safeguarding framework and principles (Lefevre *et al*, 2023). This innovative approach focuses on understanding and responding to the broader social contexts that affect young people's safety, aligning closely with the principles of Ivison Trust's own Relational Safeguarding model. This convergence of ideas suggests a collective movement toward more comprehensive and supportive child protection and adolescent safeguarding practices that centre the voices and experiences of children, young people and, importantly, their parents and caregivers.

# Suggestions for Practice and Policy Improvements

## 1. Embed Parent Advocates to Support Navigation Across Systems

Parent advocates should be embedded as funded roles within safeguarding teams, acting as dedicated allies to help parents navigate the often complex and fragmented systems of education, police, safeguarding, and youth justice. Parent advocates can provide independent advice, build trust with families, support them through meetings and decision-making processes, and help them understand their rights and responsibilities. They can also act as a critical bridge between families and professionals, promoting mutual understanding and reducing conflict.

### Implementation:

Local safeguarding partnerships should formally commission parent advocate roles, ideally co-designed with parents who have lived experience. Advocates must be independent of statutory decision-making structures to maintain trust. Success should be measured through qualitative feedback from families, advocate involvement rates in key safeguarding meetings, and the inclusion of advocate-supported insights in care planning. Accountability can be strengthened through regular reporting on advocate caseloads, impact outcomes, and satisfaction ratings from both parents and practitioners.



## 2. Treat Parents as True Partners

Parents must be treated as central partners in safeguarding processes, moving beyond tokenistic consultation towards genuine co-production of plans and interventions. This involves actively valuing parents' insights, creating space for their voices in decision-making forums, and recognising their vital role in protecting and supporting their children. Building trust requires consistency, transparency, and respectful communication across all agencies.

### Implementation:

Multi-agency safeguarding protocols should be revised to define expectations for family participation clearly. Tools such as co-produced safety plans and structured family-involvement checklists should be embedded within case management processes. Measurement could include parental attendance and participation rates in multi-agency meetings, recorded examples of co-produced actions, and parent-reported experiences of involvement and respect. Regular independent audits of case files and care plans should verify the presence of meaningful parental input.



### 3. Recognise and Plan for Harm Inside the Home

Exploitation occurring outside the home frequently introduces or intensifies harm and relational strain within the family. Safeguarding responses must assess and address these impacts holistically, supporting families in managing conflict, rebuilding trust, and maintaining stability. Co-developed safety plans must encompass both external and internal risks, helping families restore a sense of security and relational strength.

### 4. Enhance Multi-agency Collaboration

To provide coherent responses to exploitation, multi-agency collaboration must be significantly strengthened. Information sharing needs to be timely and purposeful; social work support must be consistent and relationship-based; and early interventions should be prioritised to prevent escalation. Parents highlighted the damage caused by fragmented, reactive responses – greater alignment and continuity are essential.

#### Implementation:

Assessment frameworks should explicitly include exploration of intra-familial harm related to external exploitation (e.g. trauma, sibling conflict, secondary victimisation of parents). Practitioners should facilitate joint family sessions to develop comprehensive safety plans addressing home dynamics and external risks. Measurement could include tracking the use and outcomes of these integrated safety plans, as well as improvements in family functioning (e.g., via pre- and post-assessment tools) and family feedback on their perceived safety at home. Accountability should be built into multi-agency review cycles.



#### Implementation:

Safeguarding partnerships should develop shared information-sharing agreements specifically addressing child exploitation, with clear protocols on thresholds and timeliness. Stable key worker roles should be prioritised to ensure consistent family support across agencies. Early help offers should be monitored and strengthened through multi-agency pathways. Success should be tracked via case progression audits, family satisfaction surveys on collaboration quality, and analysis of missed intervention opportunities. Cross-agency leadership groups should hold partners accountable for collaborative performance.



## 5. Recognise Child Exploitation as a Core Safeguarding Priority

Child exploitation must be recognised as a core safeguarding concern, on par with other forms of abuse. Elevating its status will ensure safeguarding responses are more consistent, timely, and family-focused, with clearer pathways and better-trained professionals across all agencies.

## 6. Strengthen Statutory – Voluntary Sector Partnerships

Effective safeguarding of exploited children and support for their families require genuine partnerships between statutory agencies and third-sector organisations. These partnerships should be formalised through co-commissioning, joint training, and integrated pathways of support. Voluntary sector partners bring vital expertise, community trust, and continuity of support – this capacity must be fully harnessed.

### Implementation:

Local safeguarding strategies should formally position child exploitation alongside other core abuse categories. Workforce development plans should ensure that all frontline staff – not just specialist teams – are trained to identify and respond to exploitation. Measurement should include training coverage across the workforce, rates of appropriate referrals, and consistency of response across different types of exploitation. Partnership boards should monitor and report on exploitation response outcomes in line with other safeguarding priorities.



### Implementation:

Joint commissioning frameworks should be established to fund voluntary sector contributions to safeguarding and family support. Multi-agency training programmes should be developed and delivered jointly by statutory and third-sector practitioners. Regular partnership forums should be convened to review joint working and resolve barriers. Measurement can include the proportion of cases receiving integrated support, joint attendance at safeguarding meetings, and qualitative feedback from families on the value of voluntary sector involvement. Partnership agreements should include clear accountability frameworks and review points.



## 7. Prioritise Anti-oppressive Practice

Safeguarding responses must actively counteract adultification bias, build cultural competence, and address intersecting vulnerabilities that affect exploited children and their families. All practitioners require core training and a reflective space to understand how systemic inequalities influence perceptions of risk, harm, and parental capability. Embedding anti-oppressive practice is fundamental to achieving fair, compassionate, and effective safeguarding.

### Implementation:

Mandatory anti-oppressive practice training should be included in safeguarding workforce development programmes. Reflective supervision and case discussion forums should explicitly address bias and power dynamics to ensure a more inclusive and equitable environment. Practice audits should include indicators of equitable treatment and cultural competence. Measurement should include pre-and post-training assessments, analysis of differential outcomes for minoritised children and families, and parent-reported experiences of respect and fairness. Leadership boards should review progress on embedding anti-oppressive principles and hold agencies accountable for addressing identified disparities.



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protecting  
children, supporting  
families

## About Iverson Trust

We work to keep children safe from exploitation by supporting their parents and carers, disrupting the exploiters and working in partnership with police and family services.

[iversontrust.org.uk](https://iversontrust.org.uk)

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