



The impact of child sexual abuse on victims can be devastating and can last a lifetime. Before the pandemic, at least **one-in-six** 11-17 year-olds had experienced some form of sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup> During lockdown, with children stuck in unsafe homes and both children and abusers spending more time online, we are concerned that there is a 'perfect storm' of potential harm. Barnardo's current [TV advert](#) demonstrates how sexual grooming and abuse feels from the child's perspective, using computer-generated komodo dragons to depict perpetrators.

### 1. The impact of child sexual abuse and exploitation

- CSA is a real threat to all children. It can take place **in person or online**. Children can be groomed or forced into sexual activity by family members, or by adults not known to the family. **However, we know it is vastly under-reported.**
- Barnardo's has been working to tackle child sexual abuse for more than **25 years**. We are increasingly supporting young people with overlapping vulnerabilities such as criminal exploitation, domestic abuse and physical, emotional or sexual abuse.
- Children with **additional vulnerabilities** are at greater risk — for example, children with a disability are three times more likely to be abused.<sup>2</sup>
- **Two-in-three** children and young people we support who have been victims of child sexual abuse or exploitation were groomed online before meeting their abuser.
- The impact of child sexual abuse on victims can be devastating. It is associated with an increased risk of both **mental and physical health problems** and has implications for the families of victims and survivors, and for wider society.

### 2. Covid-19 has put more children at risk

- Covid-19 and the necessary lockdown have meant that children and young people have been largely '**hidden**' from teachers and professionals. Since lockdown began, **45%** of our frontline staff have seen a decrease in referrals from schools, local authorities and police.
- Meanwhile, the National Crime Agency reported that **300,000** people in the UK present a sexual threat to children<sup>3</sup>, and Europol raised concerns about an increase in online activity by those seeking child abuse material during lockdown.<sup>4</sup>
- A shortage of online content moderators has also put children at **greater risk of encountering harmful content** during the lockdown.<sup>5</sup>
- With the summer holidays approaching and with safe spaces for young people, like summer camps, sports activities, and youth clubs still closed, we are concerned that children and young people are facing a 'perfect storm' of potential exploitation and abuse. These children are **more likely to go unrecognised and unsupported - remaining hidden.**

### Barnardo's [See, Hear, Respond](#) Service

- See, Hear, Respond is a service provided across England by Barnardo's and a consortium of national and local community-based organisations in response to Covid-19. It supports children and young people experiencing harm during lockdown but who are not receiving statutory support.
- Working with partners, the services provide remote support including online counselling, a telephone helpline and digital support; face to face interventions such as group work or 1-to-1 support; and support for reintegration into education.

<sup>1</sup> [NSPCC, 2011.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [NSPCC, 2014. We have the right to be safe': Protecting disabled children from abuse](#)

<sup>3</sup> [National Crime Agency, April 2020. Law enforcement in coronavirus online safety push.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Guardian, April 2020. Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [BBC, April 2020. Coronavirus: Internet child abuse images not being deleted](#)

### 3. What needs to change?

#### In the short term:

- Children and young people who have suffered sexual abuse or been at risk during the lockdown must be **identified and supported** by professionals.
- **Over the summer** there should be activities available to all children and young people to help them recover from trauma and social isolation, and give professionals the chance to identify safeguarding and other concerns.

#### In the longer term:

- The Government should urgently publish its promised CSA Strategy and ensure departments work together to prevent abuse and bring perpetrators to justice.
- The strategy should drive improvement in identification and support for groups who often fall through the gap. This includes **children aged under ten, LGBTQ and disabled children, boys, and those from BAME communities**.
- We need **long-term investment** in high quality, specialist services for victims of child sexual abuse as part of a continuum of support for children and families.
- The Government should introduce the **Online Harms Bill as soon as possible**. The White Paper highlights that companies should take reasonable steps to 'proactively identify accounts showing indicators of CSA activity and ensure children are protected from them'. However, this does not provide sufficient emphasis on prevention. Companies should be under a duty to embed 'safety by design' to prevent harm from taking place.
- Government, local agencies, corporations and communities must take **shared responsibility** for protecting and safeguarding children. Although education is vital, children must not be expected to keep themselves safe.
- We need **better awareness** to spot the signs and broad indicators of abuse — to prevent victims from being dismissed as having 'behavioural issues'.
- Schools need resources to deliver high quality **Relationships and Sex Education lessons**, to teach children about healthy relationships, consent, respect and online safety.

#### **Question for the Government:**

- Barnardo's TV advert highlights the impact of child sexual abuse on victims. What steps is the Government taking to protect children and young people from child sexual abuse at home and online during the Covid-19 outbreak?
- What steps is the Government taking to improve identification of children who are sexually abused and are under ten, LGBTQ, disabled, boys, and/or BAME?
- When will the Government publish its promised national CSA Strategy?
- How will the Government ensure all children who have been sexually abused have access to high quality, timely, specialist support such as that offered by Barnardo's to help them recover?
- When will the Government introduce the Online Harms Bill to Parliament?
- Will the Government provide further clarity on its plans to publish a full response to the Online Harms White Paper consultation "later this year"?

#### **About Barnardo's**

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Emeka Forbes (Public Affairs Officer) 07531 097 907 or [emeka.forbes@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:emeka.forbes@barnardos.org.uk).