



**Guidelines for First  
Responders in Child  
Sexual Abuse  
and Exploitation Cases**

## TERMINOLOGY

**First Responder:** Within the context of these guidelines, a **first responder** is a person in a professional capacity who is among the first to be informed about a (potential) child sexual abuse and is required to (re)act in order to avoid further harm to the child. First responders usually work in the area of law enforcement, education and medicine. These guidelines have been drafted in support of the first group, although they may be applicable to first responders in other professions.

**Child:** In cases involving sexual exploitation, children may be defined as individuals who have not yet attained the age of consent in a specific jurisdiction. For the purpose of these guidelines, children are human beings under the age of 18 years.

**Victim and Survivor:** A person who has been sexually abused may be referred to and consider themselves as a 'victim' or as a 'survivor'. The term **victim** is often associated with innocence, but also weakness and lack of agency. The term **survivor**, on the other hand, may imply strength and agency. Individuals identify differently, and some may first identify as a victim and later, for example after completion of therapy, as a survivor. The person's own identifier should be respected and used where possible and appropriate.

**Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation:** Sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of a child can take several forms, e.g. rape, sexual assaults, sexual grooming online, sexual coercion and extortion, live distant child abuse, recording or depiction of sexual activity with children, sharing sexually explicit images and videos, etc.

**Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)** is defined as any kind of material, usually images, videos and audio files, depicting acts of sexual abuse of children, including depiction of explicit images of intimate body parts for sexual and financial purposes.

**Child Sexual Exploitation Material (CSEM)** is used in a broader sense to encompass all other sexualised material depicting or involving children, e.g. series of images related to sexual abuse of children, text files (manuals, chats), etc.

**Europool encourages using the term 'child (sexual) abuse material' and not 'child pornography'.**

The concept of 'child pornography' helps child sex abusers, as it offers legitimacy and compliance on the part of the victim, and therefore legality on the part of the sex abuser. The use of the term 'child pornography' conjures up images of children posing in 'provocative' positions, rather than suffering horrific abuse. Every photograph or video captures an actual situation where a child has been abused. This is not pornography.



**Trauma:** Trauma shall be understood as a person's emotional response to a painful experience (e.g. accident, rape, natural disaster). Immediately after the event, shock and denial can be expected. Longer-term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. In children and adolescents, trauma may occur in cases of sexual abuse and violence.

**Child-centred and trauma-informed practices:** All practices in relation to child sexual abuse should be child-centred and trauma-informed. **Child-centred** means that the child's safety and well-being is the focus of all actions, and the child is involved in all decision-making. **Trauma-informed** practice recognises the trauma or distress associated with sexual abuse and strives to minimise the risk for any further traumatising as much as possible.

## OVERVIEW OF (CHILD) VICTIMS' RIGHTS

Child victims are recognised to be particularly vulnerable and in need of procedures that are adapted to their special needs. They should be informed of their rights and their role, as well as the scope, timing and progress of the proceedings and of the disposition of their cases.

Generalisations are to be avoided. Child victims' rights should be respected according to their individual needs and circumstances in order to find the best solution customised to fit their case, minimising any possible additional or future harm.

First responders are to respect the following rights to the highest extent possible, whenever they encounter a child victim:

The right to:	
1	Be protected from all forms of violence, including all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.
2	Be given special attention and assistance, especially when a child is deprived of their family environment.
3	Ensure rehabilitation, e.g. physical and psychological recovery, social reintegration.
4	Be treated with dignity and compassion.
5	Be protected from discrimination.
6	Be informed.
7	Be heard and to express views and concerns.
8	Effective assistance, including legal and/or other representative.
9	Privacy.
10	Be protected from hardship during the justice process, including effective investigation, prosecution and judicial procedure.
11	Safety.
12	Reparation and to compensation of the damage they suffered.
13	Special preventive measures.

### GUIDING PRINCIPLE

The best interest of the child, especially as victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, shall be the primary concern in all activities carried out by a first responder.

Some rights will be initially assured by the first responder, some will be granted during the investigation, some at a later stage. Any uncertainty regarding the child's age should not prevent the initiation of a criminal investigation or guaranteeing the victim's rights.

Each victim of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation acts differently. To untrained officials, such behaviours may cause doubts and/or denial that sexual violence even occurred.

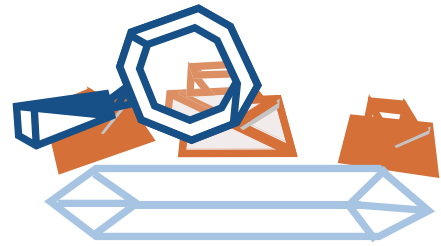
See page 5 - 5F's in trauma.

First responders must be especially careful with the fact that there is no discrimination or possible devaluation of the victim's rights. If a first responder is not sure or have a hint of doubt, he or she should seek for advice immediately.

## SCENARIO EXAMPLES

First responders may be contacted or learn about a (potential) child sexual abuse from different sources.

The following scenarios are example situations they may encounter (the list is not exhaustive):



**1**

**A child discloses directly to first responders that they have been sexually abused/exploited.**

**2**

**A third person reports directly to first responders that a child has been sexually abused/exploited following the disclosure of a child.**

**3**

**A person discloses historic CSAE to first responders.**

**4**

**First responders suspect a child was sexually abused or they indirectly learn about a CSAE case.**

- a. Child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) showing the sexual abuse of a child is reported to first responders.
- b. First responders learn through talking to other people that a child may be sexually abused/ exploited.
- c. First responders suspect (additional) CSAE in a case you investigate.

They aim to help them understand how can they best support, and what elements they have to keep in mind and pay attention to. In each of the highlighted scenarios, first responders will find space to write their own notes. At the end of the document, they will find a dedicated section to list relevant support services, medical services and applicable legislation within their regions.

This structured approach is complemented with a flowchart, which provides first responders with a clear overview of their activities (child-centred and trauma-informed). It is to be used as a practical tool to assist them on their decision-making process, while taking into consideration their national legislation and policies.

### IMPORTANT

It is advised that first responders familiarise themselves with the relevant laws on child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) in their countries, as well as with relevant local services working in the area of child sexual abuse that can offer support. These may include: specialised CSAE units in local law enforcement agencies, medical services including paediatric services and sexual abuse/rape referral services, child protection services and psychological or crisis intervention services. It is deemed useful to keep at hand the contact details for such services, so that they can refer children, carers and other witnesses to them.

## 5F'S IN TRAUMA

There are mainly five different automatic and instinctive responses to fear and trauma which can be seen in the context of sexual assault. These are fight, flight, freeze, flop, and friend. These reactions are intended to protect us from further harm, aiming to survive a dangerous situation. Keep in mind that each victim may react differently.



### Fight

Resisting the attacker by fighting either physically (e.g. pushing and struggling) and/or verbally (e.g. saying/shouting “no”).



### Flight

Running, backing away or hiding to put physical distance between the victim and the attacker.



### Freeze

Becoming rigid, tense, still and silent around the attacker. May be unable to vocalize “no”, but freezing is not giving consent. This is a common reaction to rape and sexual violence.



### Flop

Similar to freezing, but instead of tensing and becoming rigid, the body relaxes and goes limp (muscles become loose, body goes floppy).

This automatic reaction can reduce the physical pain of what is happening to the victim. The mind can also shut down to protect itself.



### Friend

Can involve calling for help and/or trying to ‘befriend’ the attacker in an attempt to stall, to placate or to negotiate/plead with them. Again, this is not consent. It is an instinctive survival mechanism.

# DISCLAIMER

## Guidelines for Law Enforcement First Responders in Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Cases

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Resources used for these guidelines are available in the official GRACE project deliverable D10.8 – Best Practices on Victim Support for LEA first responders. Published on: <https://grace-fct.eu/>.



### About [GRACE project](#)

GRACE stands for Global Response Against Child Exploitation. It is an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project that aims to equip law enforcement agencies (LEAs) with advanced digital and analytical tools that improve their operational capacity to address child sexual exploitation material (CSEM).

The growth in online CSEM is a significant challenge for European LEAs. Referrals of CSEM exceed the LEAs capacity to respond in a practical and timely manner. To safeguard victims, prosecute offenders and limit the spread of CSEM, LEAs need a next-generation AI-powered investigative platform.

At the heart of the project, GRACE has three core concepts.

1. Address the volume and analyse the content of online CSEM through technological innovations;
2. Provide genuine operational value to LEAs in their investigation of online CSEM;
3. Impact at the strategic and policy level in the harmonisation of EU-wide responses to CSE.



### About ECTEG's eFirst project

ECTEG is the European Cybercrime Training and Education Group, an International non-for profit organisation funded by the EU Commission. ECTEG comprises participants from European Union Member States and candidate countries' law enforcement agencies, international bodies, academia and private industry.

Its eFirst is a first responders e-learning focusing on essential IT forensics and cybercrime, available in English and translated with adapted content in several EU languages.



### About Europol

The European Cybercrime Centre (EC3) was set up by Europol to strengthen the law enforcement response to cybercrime in the EU and thus to help protect European citizens, businesses and governments from online crime.

As a form of cybercrime, child sexual exploitation is one of the EU's priorities in the fight against serious and organised crime as part of the [European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats \(EMPACT\)](#).

TOGETHER TO SUPPORT VICTIMS



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