

# Working with survivors of child sexual abuse material

*Five principles for professionals*

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This research report was written by Dr. Michael Salter and Dr. Delanie Woodlock from the University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) on behalf of the Canadian Centre for Child Protection Inc. UNSW Sydney, is a public research university based in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Established in 1949, UNSW Sydney is one of the founding members of Group of Eight, a coalition of Australian research-intensive universities. For more information visit <https://www.unsw.edu.au/>.

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**Content note: The aim of this guide is to support professionals to work more effectively with survivors. The guide does not describe details of abuse but includes reflections and recommendations from professionals based on their experience and expertise. If you are a survivor of child sexual abuse and you find any information in this report distressing, we encourage you to reach out to supports in your community.**

A range of professionals come into contact with children and adults who have been exploited through child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Victims and survivors may be known to authorities, where their abuse has been investigated and prosecuted, and their abuse images and videos archived in police databases. Alternatively, victims and survivors may be unknown to authorities. Most child sexual abuse victims do not disclose at the time, and the recording of abuse can compound trauma and further decrease the likelihood of disclosure. Many victims depicted in CSAM have not been identified by law enforcement. Some victims may be unaware of the recording of their abuse or its distribution.

These different scenarios pose practical and ethical challenges for professionals working with CSAM survivors. This resource was developed through interviews with 12 professionals, including law enforcement officers, lawyers, and mental health workers, about their engagement with CSAM survivors. They shared five key principles to inform professional engagement with CSAM survivors across a variety of settings.

# 1. ACKNOWLEDGING THE COMPLEXITY OF CSAM PRODUCTION

The circumstances in which CSAM is produced are diverse, complicated, and can challenge presumptions about the dynamics of abuse. A police officer with extensive experience in CSAM investigations emphasised that law enforcement need to start each investigation with an open mind. He said:

I've always emphasised to police when I'm giving training — whatever leads you to the door, is just the key to the door. You then need to investigate. Any person in that house could be your target, could be the offending person or who could be in unison offending against the child. And you need to work your way backwards through the investigation to prove that they are not offending against the child.

Another officer had worked in the field of child sexual abuse for five years before she began investigating CSAM cases. Nonetheless, she was shocked by what she saw when she first began analysing CSAM images and videos:

I thought I'd seen it all, heard it all, and really being confronted with the material I had absolutely no idea how ugly it is, and how bad it actually is. It's even worse than you can imagine.

CSAM victims may have been abused by a family member or friend, an institutional abuser, a stranger, an online offender or some combination thereof. They are very traumatised and have often been forced to engage in acts that they feel deeply ashamed of. Adults who many had assumed were protective may have been neglectful, betraying, collusive, or abusive. A therapist identified the importance of being able to tolerate this complexity in a professional setting:

To me, the most important thing is the ability to handle and tolerate, and also still be able to show up when a client is telling you something. That's the first step. Because that already will induce more shame if you do not acknowledge what has happened to them. The client picks up on that.

A lawyer with a number of CSAM clients named “witnessing” as an important part of his professional practice. Holding firm alongside the survivor and being present with the severity and complexity of their abuse was an act of solidarity that he valued beyond the specific practical benefits of his professional services.

It is really important to be present with the victim in the room at that time as a witness to what happened to them, in terms of validating their experience. This is why we investigate war crimes. [Some might say] “The victims are dead, what does it matter?” ... Well, I think it does matter. For me at least, I have the feeling that this has some value above and beyond all of the technicalities for the reason that we're doing it.

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## 2. UNDERSTANDING AND ACCOMMODATING THE UNIQUE IMPACTS OF CSAM ON VICTIMS

CSAM has specific and unique impacts that are not widely understood in professional settings. A therapist described how he needed to integrate multiple skills in his work with CSAM survivors, drawing on his knowledge of memory, dissociation, developmental trauma, and attachment to create a therapeutic environment for his clients. He said:

**You need to have a really strong ability to regulate the client’s brain. Co-regulation is necessary because this goes back to attachment, where usually these abuses are part of the attachment individual [such as a parent] in many cases.**

The recording of sexual abuse is experienced by many victims as deeply shameful and traumatic. Police working CSAM cases often encounter scenarios where the victim denies or minimises the abuse, despite the seizure of images or videos clearly depicting their abuse. One police officer described the very sensitive process of letting a victim know that CSAM had been seized in order to facilitate disclosure. She explained:

**A male teenager, he actually didn’t disclose the abuse, he didn’t want to report it. He was saying he wasn’t sure, then only when he was put in front of the evidence — not showing [him], but saying we’ve seen some videos and we know bad things have happened — only then he said a very, very minimised version of what we could see.**

The ongoing distribution of CSAM can keep survivors in a state of persistent retraumatisation. It is not reasonable to expect survivors to put their abuse in the past when their images and videos are currently being shared online. A lawyer explained the importance of bearing in mind that CSAM survivors are being revictimized moment-by-moment:

**You have the first trauma of the trafficking and the abuse, and then you have the secondary trauma of “oh, my goodness, these [images and videos] are out there and they’re not going away. They’re my past, they’re my present and they’re my future.”**

Another lawyer commented on the hypervigilance of her CSAM survivor clients who were constantly worried that other people had seen their CSAM: “it could be anybody they see on the street, at the grocery store, at the gas station.” This is an ongoing source of anxiety and distress for this group. She went on to explain the changes she had made to her practice to accommodate her CSAM survivor clients, including being flexible with deadlines and meetings because “they may not be able to make that because on that day it might just be too much for them.”

### 3. SEEKING TRAINING FOR KNOWLEDGE GAPS

There are currently few opportunities for professionals to receive training on working with CSAM survivors. Professionals may instead need to identify their own knowledge gaps and try to source necessary training and information. Lawyers, therapists, and police officers all emphasised the importance of training on sexual abuse, trauma, and dissociation. A lawyer said:

**You need to understand how trauma works. Because our clients are traumatised and continuously retraumatised as soon as they're notified or have knowledge of their image having been traded.**

It was helpful for professionals to learn about technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and the ways in which CSAM is circulated online. This knowledge made them more effective in their work with survivors. Therapists described undertaking research into the prevalence and patterns of technology-facilitated abuse. Lawyers also engaged in background research and, for some, they were required to view CSAM as part of legal matters (with their client's permission). One police officer had been exposed to a variety of CSAM as part of her role, and she felt that it had significantly improved her skills as an interviewer, since she knows what's "really happening." She said:

**I would be a much better interviewer now after everything I've seen than I was before, just because now I think I have a good grasp of what's really happening. You see a lot. I think I would handle situations much, much better with offenders and also with victims. So it might be also good training for interviewers to come and be exposed to this and really, really open your eyes to what it is, and then you would maybe understand the situation much, much better.**



Law enforcement officers felt that there needed to be standardised procedures when working with CSAM survivors through all aspects of the investigation, including with prosecutors and judges. An officer said:

**There's no distinctive training for law enforcement agencies on how to deal with these cases ... We need to get a training program around everything from search warrants to victim identification, all those kinds of things.**

A police officer who is a trained child forensic interviewer emphasised the need for an evidence-based protocol for working with CSAM survivors. She suggested that, in the past, child interviewing had been undertaken in a less structured and deliberative way, and devolved to officers on the basis of their gender or parental status. She emphasised that:

**... we no longer interview children just because we're good with kids or we are the girl in the group, or we have our own kids. There's more to it than that. It's basically a research and best practice informed approach in how we speak with children.**

One police officer recounted a CSAM investigation where he realised, unexpectedly, that the now-adult survivor was unaware of the abuse or its recording and distribution, and he was unsure whether informing her would be helpful or harmful. He identified a need for structured, ethical decision-making frameworks for police faced with very difficult choices in CSAM cases.



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## 4. ADVOCACY FOR SURVIVORS

CSAM survivors are regularly interacting with professional services, systems, and processes that do not take their unique needs and circumstances into account. Professionals play an important role in advocating for survivors and promoting change in their interest. In the U.S., lawyers have been instrumental in law reform initiatives for CSAM survivors. One lawyer reflected on his efforts to change the law and improve legal and policing practice:

We had to change the culture, not only in the courts but with the professionals dealing with it. Then also tried to impact law enforcement. So our main position – and I think what has strengthened throughout the years — is that in many times the initial harm of what I call the act, the hands-on abuse, was only a small percentage of the ongoing abuse ... They're left with the ongoing distribution and possession of their images, which not only retrigger their initial assault, their initial trauma, but it is in and of itself an ongoing trauma. We have no language to talk about that. Part of one of my challenges was to be able to develop this sort of theory of harm and to articulate that to the courts.

Professionals are often in a unique position to campaign for change on behalf of CSAM survivors. One lawyer described the strong support she received from her CSAM clients for her advocacy work:

If there's anything that our clients want more, it's advancing the cause of all victims. They're very passionate about that.

Based on their frontline experiences, police officers had a range of recommendations for improving responses to CSAM victims. A police officer complained that the support services available to CSAM victims identified by law enforcement was a “postcode lottery,” and dependant on the quality and availability of local mental health and social work services. He said:

There's no unified, recognised way to deal with child victims, especially child victims of online abuse. And there's no general understanding of follow up with them. They get signed off way too quickly as being okay, and there's no kind of follow up visits – six months, 12 months, three years, whatever it might be — to check that there hasn't been PTSD or other social problems or domestic problems, or anything at all really.



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## 5. RESPECTING PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Professionals emphasised the importance of boundaries in their work with CSAM survivors. The maintenance of boundaries included not going beyond the remit of a given professional role and ensuring that personal emotional responses did not cloud professional judgement. A therapist recommended that professionals make sure they have “done their own work,” such as therapy, supervision, or debriefing:

**There has to be healthy boundaries. Very clear boundaries. Very consistent patterns of the professional. [Therapists] need to have done their own work, so that they're clean, clear, not projecting.**

While legal work is typically of limited duration, lawyers often worked with CSAM survivor clients for years or even decades, due to the ongoing distribution of their material. One lawyer described how she sought to maintain professional boundaries while, at the same time, celebrating the life accomplishments of clients:

**You're careful, obviously, of the boundaries, but you're rooting for them. So it's exciting when you hear that they get a job or they're in a relationship, because you're rooting for them. So on some levels it does get a little personal because you're happy for them to have those milestones.**

Another lawyer emphasised the affection that she feels for many of her CSAM survivor clients, who she has known for a long time. But she emphasised that “you want the client to have their own agency. We're here to give them advice, but they're making the decisions and they're supposed to be in the driver's seat.”

Some police officers will be engaged with CSAM victims, particularly if they are interviewers. However other police may instead be involved in victim identification, search warrants, and arrests in which they have little or no contact with victims. For one police officer, this was an important boundary in his work. He gathered the necessary evidence for investigators and felt that not encountering survivors directly enabled him to “move on” from cases:

**It makes it easier [for me] to move on to cases, it makes it easier to deal with the cases that we're working with. [I]t was never by design in the first instance, but for me it certainly evolved that way [not working directly with victims], that I just recognised it was an easier way and a better way for me to retain my sanity, I think, and keep at that safe distance.**

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## CONCLUSION

CSAM sits at the intersection of many different areas of professional practice. Trauma-informed and effective practice with CSAM survivors often requires professionals to develop new competencies that may not be part of routine professional education and training. Professionals should build their understanding of the diverse experiences of CSAM victims and survivors, including the circumstances in which CSAM is produced and shared, and the unique and specific impacts of CSAM victimisation. Targeted training is often necessary to develop new skills. Professionals are often engaging with CSAM survivors within service and system contexts that are poorly attuned to their needs, and it may be necessary to advocate for change in order to secure necessary supports and recognition for this victim group. Finally, it is important for professionals to be clear with themselves, their colleagues, and CSAM survivors about their professional roles and boundaries.







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