

# Parent & Caregiver Guide

For parents and caregivers of  
children and young people who  
have experienced sexual abuse

## Contents

- 2 Introduction
- 4 Your own feelings & taking care of you
- 6 Your child's feelings
- 8 Your child's behaviour
- 9 How your child may respond to trauma
- 10 Supporting your child
- 12 Sharing information
- 14 What next for you & your family?
- 16 The impact on school or college
- 18 Understanding the various services
- 20 Final message
- 21 Glossary
- 22 Space for notes
- 24 Signposting

Within the guide some words are highlighted in **bold** and can be found in the glossary on page 21

# Dear reader...

This guide has been co-created by professionals, parents and caregivers who have had similar experiences to what you may be having now. Throughout this guide, you will find words of encouragement and reassurance from those caregivers.

We are here to reassure you that all your feelings are real and understandable in this very difficult time. We want you to know that you are not alone and there is help and support available to you.

By reading this guide you are taking the first steps in understanding what your child might be feeling and what they need from you.

**“The fact that they told you and you’re reading this means you’re doing something right”**

*Anonymous Caregiver*

We also recognise how your own emotional and physical wellbeing may be affected by what has happened. Because your wellbeing is just as important as your child’s we have put together some tips on how to ensure you’re also taking care of you (we hope you will make time to read this section).

This guide has been designed to be read in parts, so please take your time and read what you think is relevant to you and your child.

We have also created two additional resources for children that sit alongside this guide, to support you in helping your child through what is happening for them and the family.

These resources are a story of what happens after sexual abuse has been discovered. They include activities and suggestions that can help families talk about and express their big feelings in a safe way.

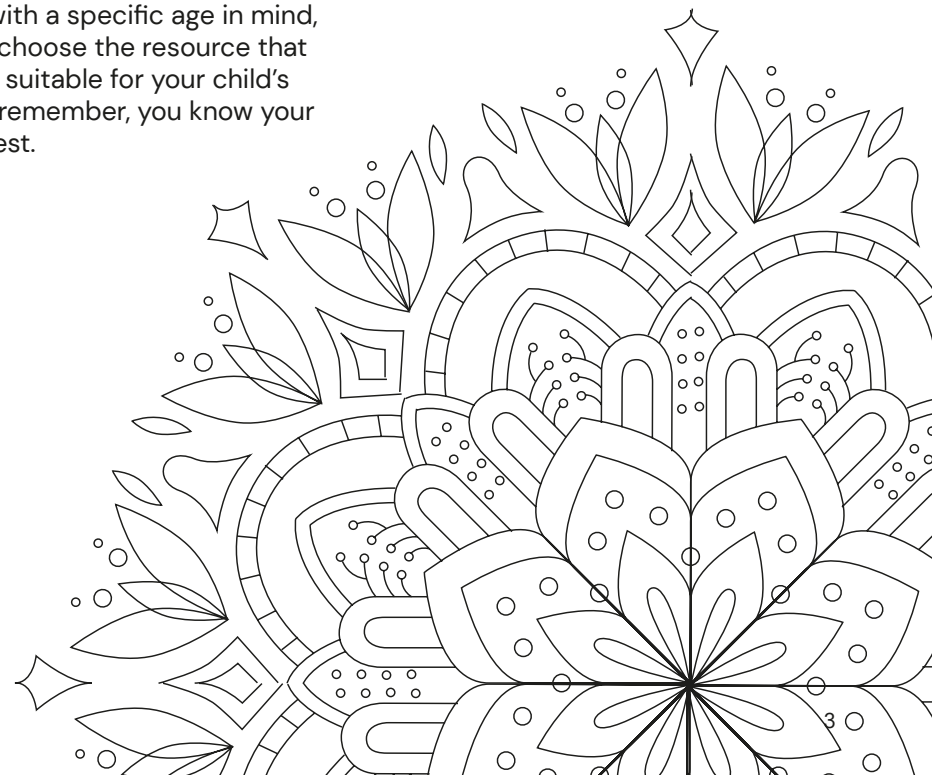
One is for children under 8, which you or another adult they trust can read together. The other is for children aged 8 to 13, they can read this independently or with someone they trust.

While each resource has been made with a specific age in mind, please choose the resource that is most suitable for your child’s needs; remember, you know your child best.

Before you begin reading remember to take your time, being kind and patient with yourself.

It’s ok if you need to step away and take a break.

*Colouring can be relaxing for adults, try colouring in the mandala below to see if this is relaxing for you.*



# Your own feelings & taking care of you

You may have noticed a difference in yourself since finding out what has happened to your child. You may feel your whole world has been turned upside down, that your mind is overwhelmed, and you are physically and emotionally exhausted. This is completely normal and ok.

Learning that your child has been **sexually abused** can be emotionally crushing and it is important to recognise the impact it will have on your own emotional and physical wellbeing.

Below are some of the emotions that parents and caregivers say they experienced when they first found out what had happened to their child.

Guilt

Loss

Confused

Fear

Sad

## Looking after yourself

When flying we are told to “put our mask on first”. If we run out of oxygen, we can’t help anyone else, so it is important to prioritise your own self-care. By being in a better place emotionally and physically you will be better able to support your child going forward.

Some of you reading this guide may find that it is bringing up past experiences and memories. We have included some organisations that can support you on page 24.

## Maintaining routines for you and your family

For your own wellbeing, it will be important to do things that help you feel like yourself, even if you find you don’t enjoy them as much as you used to. This could be returning to work, cooking, or spending time on hobbies.

Where possible, try to keep family routines. Having a regular routine helps everyone know what is happening and what to expect, creating a feeling of safety.

## Speaking with someone you trust

It can be helpful to have someone to speak with about how you’re feeling. It can provide an outlet for you to express what is on your mind and how it’s impacting you. This support can also ensure you are not alone in what has happened. This could be a friend, a therapist or your GP.

We appreciate it can be difficult to know who to tell and what to say. *We have some tips on this later.*

**“You don’t have to fix everything all at once. Slow down and remember to breathe”**



### Practical tip

There are different ways of making time for yourself, here are a few ideas:



Enjoying a walk in nature



Yoga/ Meditation



Exercising



Baking



Seeing a friend



Treating yourself to a coffee

Follow this link for some more self-care information: [Self-care for Parents and Carers](#)

## Why children may find it hard to share what has happened:

You may be feeling guilty that you did not know about the abuse and that your child had not been able to tell anyone – It is not your fault that this has happened.

It may be that your child was ashamed or embarrassed about what was happening. They may have been **groomed** into

believing that the abuse was their fault or that they would not be believed. They may have been fearful of what would happen if the abuse was discovered.

Reassure your child that they are believed and loved regardless of what has happened and that they are not to blame.

# Your child's feelings

Every child is unique and will need varying levels of support at different times. Some children may appear angry while others may become shy or withdrawn. There will be some children that appear to be "just fine" and this is ok too. Your child is likely to have some big and difficult feelings and they need to express them in their own way and in their own time - Please remember your child may display all or none of these behaviours.

Your child may find it difficult to talk about their feelings and may not want to talk at all. There are many ways to help them with their feelings without talking; this is explored further in the supporting children's resources.

## Some of the big feelings your child may be having:

- Sadness
- Scared
- Anger
- Shame
- Guilt
- Confusion
- Relief
- Overwhelmed

It can be difficult to know when or how to have these conversations, so we suggest you follow your child's lead and take things slowly. When your child does share how they are feeling or talks about what has happened, we recommend listening carefully and responding with compassion and understanding. It may be that your child doesn't want to talk, or if they do, they might talk with others. This is not uncommon and is not a reflection on you or your relationship with your child.

Your child may want to talk, but only at certain times of the day such as just before bedtime. If your child is doing this, we suggest planning ahead and perhaps going to bed earlier in order to make time for those conversations.

Avoiding conversations about feelings or what has happened may feel like it will protect your child from further hurt. However, this may lead your child feeling like it is not ok to talk about what has happened or how they feel.

Not all children will need further or specialist support immediately after the abuse. If you are worried about your child's emotional wellbeing you can find out more about services (such as specialist therapeutic services) in the signposting section (p24). In this section you will also find links to resources that discuss **Self-Harm & Safe-Harm**.

## Friendships

You may have noticed that your child has been falling out with their friends more often or that they are showing less interest in spending time with them; this is not uncommon. Reassure your child that this is OK and will get better. Allowing your child to take things at their pace can ease the stress of managing friendships during this time.

## Helpful ways to talk about feelings



Create a safe and comfortable space for you and your child to talk about their feelings. This could be by making sure there are no distractions or that they won't be overheard. This will help reassure them that your focus is on them and you're available to answer questions.



Some children may find it easier to talk while doing other activities, such as baking, colouring or art activities (you could try playdough or water beads / orbies)



Sometimes the best conversations happen during a car journey, especially with older children.



Listen without interruption. Allow your child to say everything they need before you respond. A pause may just be your child thinking about what to say next. Repeating back what your child has said can ensure you have understood.



There are many children's books that address big feelings, some are listed in the under 8's guide. Books can be a helpful starting point to talk about difficult things or provide your child opportunities to ask questions.



Avoid asking detailed questions about what happened and only talk for as long as your child feels comfortable, you can always return to the conversation later.



Drawing, creative activities and play can be helpful ways for your child to communicate their feelings without words.

# Your child's behaviour

You may have noticed that your child's behaviour has changed or that they are reacting differently to everyday things since the abuse happened. When big and difficult things are happening, some children feel they need to regain control over what is happening to them. This may look like becoming disruptive around routines. For example bedtime or bath time or becoming upset or disappointed at small changes in routine.

It may be helpful to know that controlling behaviours are your child's way of feeling safe when they feel things are moving faster than they can keep up with or going in a direction they don't like.

**"Find ways to return control to your child"**



## Practical tips: Giving your child control and family routine



Visual timetables or calendars can support your child to know what is happening and when.



Encourage your child and yourself to keep in touch with friends and regular activities.



Share appropriate information when you get it so they feel included.



Pick your battles - It is ok to let some things go for a while. For example, if mealtimes are becoming problematic, it's ok to be flexible with this.



Give your child choice and involvement when appropriate.

# How your child may respond to trauma

Our brains have a built-in "smoke alarm" that keeps us safe. It helps us recognise danger and to move away from it. This could be running away from an angry dog or not going too far from our friends in a new place.

When we have experienced **trauma** like abuse, the smoke alarm in our brain can become very sensitive as it tries to protect us from further hurt or danger. This means your child may begin to feel there is danger even when there is not.

## Things that can feel unsafe after trauma:

### Socially

Not being the boss of a game or friends not wanting to play.

### Emotionally

Making mistakes or trying new things.

### Physically

People getting too close or being told what to do

When your child feels unsafe and their smoke alarm has taken over, they can respond in ways which are confusing to themselves and others. This is commonly recognised as fight, flight, freeze or fawn. Some examples of these are:



### Fight

Being aggressive, confrontational or threatening, unable to follow instructions, disruptive, loud or noisy.



### Flight

Unable to concentrate, pushing away friends and family members, avoiding situations, running away or hiding.



### Freeze

Confused or forgetful, bumping into things, daydreaming or not listening.



### Fawn

Being overly helpful, doing what they can to make the other person happy, feeling responsible for other people's feelings.

For more information, visit [The Flight Fight Freeze Response](#)

# Supporting your child

When your child is in fight, flight, freeze or fawn, their brain is trying to remove the danger it has detected. These responses are involuntary and happen without your child being entirely in control of what they are doing. They can happen quickly and without warning, sometimes feeling 'over the top'. For example, if there was a lion directly in front of you, you may start to scream. However, if it was suddenly in a cage and the danger was removed, you may feel safer and stop screaming.

When your child is overwhelmed, they will need your support to manage their emotions and behaviour to regain a sense of calm. If they go quiet, this is often their brains way of re-booting and it's important to give them space whilst letting them know you're available.

When they are back to themselves, find some time to speak to them about what was happening and how they were feeling. Perhaps think about what you could both do to help next time this happens.

**"I wish I had realised you needed me to carry on being a normal mum."**

**Below are some messages shared by parents & caregivers that you might find useful when speaking with you child**

**"You have done nothing wrong"**

**"You are going to be ok"**

**"Together we can get through this"**

# Practical tips to support your child

Have a look at the children's self-help resources for some more activities.

## Creating connection

Your child may find simple activities like going for a walk, baking with you, watching a film or helping out in the garden a comforting way to feel connected to you.

## Calming activities

Incorporate calming activities into your daily routine such as deep breathing or guided meditation. This will be particularly helpful when they are overwhelmed.

[Mindfulness Hub - BBC Children in Need](#)

## Having fun

In difficult times it can be strange to think about laughter and fun. However, sometimes this is just what is needed. You know what makes your child smile so find time to make it happen for both of you.

## Managing emotions

When your child is upset, they will use you as an emotional mirror or a thermometer. How you manage your own feelings while supporting them can have a huge impact. While we appreciate it can be difficult; staying calm and supportive, responding with understanding and recognising the feelings behind your child's behaviour can support them in finding their own calmness.

We also recommend reading *Therapeutic Parenting* by Sarah Naish or looking at the [PACE website](#)

# Sharing information- who, what, where, when & how?

This isn't something you can do on your own and you will need support around you. Talking about **child sexual abuse** is never easy, but if you do choose to tell someone about what has happened, it may be helpful to have a plan about how you would like to do this. We've thought of a few suggestions on what might be helpful to consider before sharing with others.



## Who?

When thinking about who to tell, it may be helpful to consider questions such as:

- ▶ Do you think they will react in a supportive way?
- ▶ Have you heard them make unsupportive or judgemental remarks about sexual abuse or do they hold any cultural beliefs around sexual abuse?
- ▶ Do they know the offender, and if so, could this affect their reaction to you telling them?

## What?

What information you choose to share is entirely up to you and your family. Often people don't know how to respond to hearing such difficult information. They may ask for details but that doesn't mean you have to tell them. You can always say, "I wanted to tell you that this happened to us, but I don't feel comfortable sharing any more details about it right now. What I need right now is for you to listen and understand"

## Where?

When sharing information, think about where this will take place and whether there will be interruptions and privacy. You could ask for somebody you trust to be there with you when you meet with the individual/organisation you are sharing information with.

## How?

How you choose to tell someone should be driven by what is best for you and your child. It could be in-person or over the phone. Keep in mind that it will look different for each family, so it is important to consider what is right for your child, you, and your family. When you have decided who you will tell, it will be important to express your child's and your needs first. You could say something like: "I'd like to tell you about something that's hard for me to talk about and it would mean a lot to me if you would just listen and not ask any questions."

## When?

When you have decided who to share this with, it's important to find a time that works for you and is not influenced by other pressures, for example the school pick-up. Make sure you have the person's full attention so that any information you share with them is understood.

Your child has already experienced a loss of choice and so ensuring that they have a voice in who their information is shared with is important. It can also help them to understand that sharing should only be with relevant services and individuals as and when is necessary.

**"You will have a lot of conversations, keeping a note of who you have told and what can be helpful."**

It may be helpful to know that it is not uncommon for children to 'take back' or **recant** that they have been abused. This does not mean they are lying. Many children take back what they have said because they want to protect the person who has hurt them, or because they do not like how it is impacting their family. If your child does recant, explain that you understand that things may feel scary now and you will believe them no matter what.



# What next for you & your family?

## Impact on the immediate and wider family

Child sexual abuse can be devastating and can create a lot of uncertainty and conflict within a family, particularly for those of you that did not cause the harm.

You may experience challenges socially, emotionally and financially, which can make it harder to support your child.

As you will find yourself supporting your child more, both practically and emotionally, there may also be additional pressure on your time, particularly if you have other children.

You may find that family celebrations and holidays change as some of the family may no longer get together. You may also notice a shift in family dynamics because of the response from others or because your child may no longer feels comfortable around others.

## Supporting siblings within the family

Depending on their age, siblings may also need help understanding what has happened, why their sibling may be behaving differently and why things within the family have changed.

If you notice that their behaviour has changed, it will be important to acknowledge their feelings and emotions by creating space for them to talk about how they're feeling (we suggest using the same methods as page 7). It may be that they are feeling guilty because they were not able to protect their sibling or angry towards the abuser. Especially if the sexual abuse has been within the family.

Sharing appropriate information about changes within the family will ensure everyone understands why things have changed, rather than guessing.

[The Green House parent and carers support guide](#) has some more helpful information on page 11.

## Managing other people's reactions

For so many, the reality of child sexual abuse is understandably overwhelming. Sometimes people do not know how to respond or become fearful for their own families. If this happens, please know it is not a reflection on you or your family. You may notice that some people, including close family members and friends, find it hard to accept the reality of what has happened and may struggle to manage their own emotions. If someone in your life isn't supportive or does not believe your child, that doesn't mean that others won't. It can be incredibly hurtful and upsetting when someone close to you reacts this way and can sometimes lead to the end of a relationship.

Please keep in mind that you are not responsible for how other people react or how they feel about what you have shared. Please be kind to yourself and take care of yours and your child's own needs before others.

## When sexual abuse has happened by someone you know

It can be a painful reality to learn that sexual abuse has been committed by someone you know and trusted.

We understand it can leave you feeling vulnerable and out of control. The feelings you experience may be overwhelming, intense and persistent. During this time, it's particularly important to make sure you are looking after yourself because of the impact it will have on your overall wellbeing.

There are specialist organisations that can support with this including those who can help with understanding and work with statutory services and family court.

**“It can feel like the rug has been pulled out from under you”**

## Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB)

Not all sexual abuse is carried out by adults. It may be that another child or young person has engaged in sexual behaviour that has been hurtful or harmful to your child. This is often known as harmful sexual behaviour. When this has happened within a family or a close family friendship it can add extra complications and emotional conflict for everyone. It might be difficult to accept, understand or know what to do to support both children.

You can find out more and access support at [Lucy Faithfull Foundation](#)

# The impact on school or college

For some children, school or college is a **safe space** and a distraction from thinking about everything that has happened or what will happen next. For others it may be an extra pressure.

Giving your child some control over who knows within their school or college and what their **support plan** involves can help them feel safe and supported. It's useful to explain to your child that professionals like social workers may come to their school or college to meet and speak with them.

**How they will they be collected from class?**

**What will happen after the meeting?**

**If possible, which room the meeting will be held in?**

**Who would they like to be in the meeting?**

Making time for your child to talk about how this will happen and exploring what help they may need to feel safe, such as being collected from class, will support their journey.

How much is shared with teachers will depend on what their role is and why you are telling them. Some may need to know as part

of their **safeguarding** roles, but it may be helpful to choose one or two trusted members of staff that can offer support on a day-to-day basis. This also gives them a better understanding as to why your child may be behaving different. They do not need to know all the details, and it is up to you what you choose to share.

Below is some support that the school or college may be able to offer:

## Student information sheet

Creating a student information sheet can show your child's support plan and needs (they might be called something different like a Student Passport). This helps teachers understand that your child may be behaving differently and the specific support they need.

Your child's school or college may have their own suggestions. We recommend speaking with them directly and thinking together about your child's needs and what is most appropriate.

## Lesson adjustments

It may be that some curriculum content is upsetting for your child – For example, content that may focus on special holidays or sex education. It's important that teachers and staff are mindful of this, and lessons are adjusted to suit what's best for your child. It does not mean that your child should not participate but that you and your child are spoken to in advance so you can make an informed choice about how to participate.

With so much happening around your child, they may struggle to focus on their education, and you may notice their learning has slowed or even regressed.

You can support them with this by reassuring them it is ok and that things will get better in time.

**Remember you are the expert on your child and know them best.**

# Understanding the various services you may encounter

There are several **statutory services** that you may interact with, some for the first time. After talking to a support service about the abuse, whether it is social services or the police, it may feel like things begin to move very quickly and that things are taken out of your hands. **It is important to remember that you have every right to question decisions that do not feel right for you or your family.**

Below are some of the services that you may speak with as you seek support. However, it's important to remember everyone's journey is different and may not be a straightforward process.

 **Click on the titles below for information on each service:**

## Medical Examinations

With your consent, they may carry out a medical examination to check for any injuries or evidence of an assault.

## Children's Social Care

They are responsible for making sure your child is safe from further harm. They will work with other services to make sure you feel supported.

## Advocacy

They will help the family with speaking to the police and making sure they receive all the right information.



## **Practical tip:**

It may be useful to make a note of who you have spoken with, dates/times of these discussions and general points of the conversation. It may also be helpful to keep records of appointments and meetings, there is space for notes on page 22 of this resource.

**“This is a gentle reminder that justice and healing is more than criminal justice - The way your child is supported and advocated for is a huge part of ‘justice.’”**

## Designated Safeguarding Lead

This is a member of staff within a school who is responsible for safeguarding. They may speak with you and your child about the support needed and may also help to organise meetings with other support services.

## Therapist

They will create a safe space for a child so they can explore how they're feeling.

## Police and Criminal Justice System

They will record and investigate what has happened and make decisions about what happens next from a legal position.

# Final message

We hope this guide has been helpful and has reminded you that you are not alone, you are not responsible, and you are taking the right steps in supporting your child. What you and your child are experiencing is incredibly difficult, so it is important to be kind and patient with yourself.

We have included a section called 'signposting' which contains lots of helpful information about topics that were not covered in this guide. It will take time, but things will begin to get better. We appreciate this may feel impossible right now, but with the right support, you and your child will move forward.

**“Don’t be afraid to ask for help, whether this is cooking or taking the kids to the park”**

Finally, we would like to say a special thank you to the children and families who participated as part of the project and development of the three resources. We are grateful for your time, input, sharing your experiences, and advice.

**“Remember you’re doing your best and you should be proud of that”**

**“There are other families this has happened to; you are not alone in this.”**

# Glossary

## Child sexual abuse

Forcing or persuading a child or young person under the age of 18 to take part in sexual activities or to expose them to sexualised images or content or acts.

## Groomed/Grooming

When a person builds a relationship with a child or young person in order to abuse or manipulate them.

## Recant

To take back or deny something which was previously said.

## Safe space

A place where a person can feel safe from physical or emotional harm.

## Safeguarding

Protecting a person’s health, wellbeing and rights; enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect.

## Safe-Harm

This is finding a safe way to express difficult feelings which feels similar to self-harm such as drawing on yourself in red pen or holding an ice-cube.

## Self-Harm

To intentionally hurt yourself to cope / deal with difficult feelings.

## Statutory services

They are essential services that are required by law, to provide a safety net for vulnerable people, such as children.

## Support plan

These plans are for people who need additional, or specialist support. They outline how best to support that person and what their needs are.

## Trauma

This is the lasting emotional response that often results from living through a distressing event.



# Signposting

## Books

---

Helping your child with loss & trauma  
*by David Trickey & Vicky Lawson*

Help! My Feelings Are Too Big  
*by K.L. Aspden*

Help! I've Got an Alarm Going Off in  
My Head: How Panic, Anxiety and  
Stress Affect Your Body  
*by Betsy De Thierry*

We are NEVER to blame!  
Poems for Children  
*by Dr Jessica Taylor & Sarah Wood*

I AM NOT TO BLAME: The colouring  
book for children *by Sarah Wood*

*Please also see the children's  
guides for helpful children's books  
and websites.*

## Websites

---

**Support for you**  
[Shout](#) or text 85285

[YoungMinds - Parents' A-Z Mental  
Health Guide](#)

**Therapeutic services for  
protective parents**  
[We Stand](#)

[Ivision Trust](#)

[Barnados Beacon](#)

**Therapeutic services for  
children and young people  
living in South London**  
[The Havens](#)

[TIGER Service | Barnardo's](#)

[Women and Girls Network](#)

[SurvivorsUK](#)

[Rape Crisis South London \(rasasc\)](#)

[Galop - the LGBT+  
anti-abuse charity](#)

**Self-harm / safe-harm**  
[Every Life Matters](#)

[Papyrus](#)

**HSB**  
[ESCB - Shorespace](#)

[Stop It Now | Preventing child  
sexual abuse](#)

**If you do not live in South London,  
you can find out about national  
services near you at:**

[Rape Crisis England & Wales](#)

[Find a rape and sexual assault  
referral centre - NHS](#)

[NSPCC | The UK children's charity](#)

[Digital Mental Health Care - Kooth](#)

[Get support | CSA Centre](#)

*Or your local Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health service.*

This guide aims to support parents and caregivers directly after finding out about child sexual abuse. We understand how difficult and overwhelming it can feel, so we have created this guide which has helpful information about the challenges faced by many families after finding out, practical tips and suggestions of other organisations that can offer further support.

*There are two additional resources for children that sit alongside this guide which aims to support you in helping your child through what is happening for them and the family. They offer ideas and activities that can support children to share their own thoughts and feelings in a safe way.*

The logo for South London CSA Support Services is contained within a white speech bubble shape. The text is arranged in three lines: 'SOUTH LONDON' in a bold, teal, sans-serif font; 'CSA' in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font; and 'SUPPORT SERVICES' in a smaller, bold, black, sans-serif font stacked to the right of 'CSA'.

**SOUTH LONDON**  
**CSA** **SUPPORT**  
**SERVICES**