**Margaret’s Story**

“I grew up in a loving home with a happy childhood. I’d never witnessed domestic abuse or understood how damaging it was.

I first met Tony\* when I was in my 20s. He was senior to me in the office, good looking and gave me lots of attention.

We started dating and I was really happy. But soon I started to see a more controlling and manipulative side to him. Tony didn’t like me wearing certain clothes or seeing my friends. He’d ask me to spend time alone with him rather than go out. He always said that he knew the best for me. I split up with him 3 times because of his controlling nature. But he begged until I went back. I loved him and believed him when he said he’d change. Even my mum thought he was lovely, he had everyone fooled.

After we got married he seemed to change. He became emotionally and psychologically abusive, threatening and belittling me. After I had my son Marcus\*, he raped me for the first time. I blamed myself. To outsiders we were picture perfect, but behind closed doors life was very different. I felt trapped.

Tony constantly accused me of having affairs, would shout and scream in my face in front of the children and would play mind games, making me feel guilty. 8 years into our marriage he started being physically abusive and the domestic violence started.

I would defend him to my family. I would plead with the children to keep quiet and be good, even though they were beautifully behaved. I felt constantly condemned and my self-esteem was really low.

As the children got older Tony started being abusive towards them too. He would shout and beat them with belts and shoes. He would punish them when I wasn’t in the house so I couldn’t intervene. Whenever we were alone I would give Marcus and Faith hugs and kisses and tell them that we all made daddy cross and we had to try our best to make him happy. I didn’t see a way out.

After living with Tony for 12 years I finally snapped. We were in the kitchen and he trapped me against a unit. I threw down the food I was preparing and slapped him in the face. Before I knew it, he had thrown me to the floor. The children were in the living room and heard my screams, luckily they didn’t see what he’d done to me.

That night, after Tony had left for work I called the police. I was afraid of giving a statement but I wanted someone to know what was going on. Eventually, the children and I were taken to a safe house. I had gone from a beautiful house to a small cramped space with no hot water and toilet paper but we were in a state of bliss. We felt safe for the first time in years and were relieved to be free.

I was worried about the violence the children had seen and how it might affect them. Both children were sullen, and weren’t very good at articulating their feelings. They were very obedient and didn’t really behave like children at all. They played quietly and were very subdued.

They both took part in the [NSPCC’s domestic abuse programme (DART)](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/childrens-services/dart-domestic-abuse-recovering-together/) at our local centre. The practitioners gave them tools to cope with their anger, like bashing a pillowcase. In one session Marcus had been asked to make a doll’s house and talk about the different things he’d seen in each room. He came home very upset and angry. He just wanted to lash out so I gave him a Yellow Pages and he wrote swear words and awful things about Tony and ripped them up and threw them away. I felt he’d finally let go of his anger.

The NSPCC’s work with my children gave them the light back behind their eyes. It felt like they’d released whatever they’d been holding on to. We were all finally happy and free to live.

If there are any parents reading this who are going through something like us, I’d say please don’t be scared and please talk to someone. Domestic abuse can happen to anyone and it’s not your fault so stop blaming yourself.

My children are my stars and I know that they will never harm anyone, but without the NSPCC’s help, they might not have been that way.”

**Lee’s Story**

"I was 16 when a friend introduced me to her church youth group. The first time I went, I met the youth leader, Adam. As I got more involved in the group, transport started to become an issue for me and Adam offered to give me lifts.

"Quite early on, Adam and I began texting. When he suggested we hang out outside of the group I didn't think anything of it. I thought it was probably common for youth workers to want to spend time with young people.

"I didn't have a lot of friends so I felt like I'd made a close friend in Adam. He was paying me attention and I enjoyed his company, it felt like he was really looking out for me.

"Then, Adam started to encourage me to hang out with him at his house. He started telling me that we had a special friendship.

"It was gradual and quite innocent to start with, but I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. Adam started sitting closer to me on the sofa, trailing his finger over mine - things I thought were strange but not big enough to react to at the time.

"Over time, Adam started to give me extended hugs and kiss my face. He'd tell me I was his best mate and what we had was special. He said it was normal to do these things, even biblical; reading me passages from the Bible.

"As things continued I told him I wasn't comfortable with what he was doing. He didn't listen and instead ramped things up by kissing me on the lips. The kissing on the lips then became more regular and I felt helpless to tell anybody about what was happening.

"When I told Adam I wasn’t gay - that I liked girls and wanted him to stop - he’d turn things around by telling me I must want this, because I’d instigated it. He’d threaten to take me off the preaching rota or stop giving me lifts. He made me feel as if I’d be ostracised from the group if I put a stop to things and told me constantly that I wasn’t to tell anyone.

"Things escalated when he made us masturbate in the same room as each other. When we weren’t together, he’d text me telling me he thought about me while he was masturbating. He continued to pressure me, saying we were going to spend our lives together and that he wanted us to have sex.

"I was so confused but knew what he was doing was wrong. I wanted it to stop but part of me was afraid to speak out because I didn't want to get him into trouble. Being unable to talk to anybody about what was happening was making me feel really depressed.

"A year and a half later, I moved away from the area to practice youth work in London. Because I was no longer in the situation I felt able to share what had happened with my new manager. Adam was removed from his post and isn't involved in the youth group any more and I was fortunate enough to receive counselling, which has really helped me move on from what happened.

"The way the law stands currently, Adam can't be legally prosecuted for what happened. This is because I was 16 at the time and he wasn't viewed to be in a position of trust.

"I'd encourage other victims of grooming and sexual abuse to talk to someone, however bad it seems or however trapped you feel. Someone will be able to help you."

**John’s Story**

"I knew from a young age that my life was different to other children. While friends’ families sat round the table and had dinner together, my dad was asleep on the sofa by 6pm. I used to think “Why’s he so tired? He’s done nothing all day.” I’d make noises to try and keep him awake. I knew something wasn’t right.

"The house was a state. There were broken windows and we had no wallpaper. We always had lots of people in the house too. They’d arrive at weird times like 2am or 6am and be really noisy. My dad had told me my mother was in prison for drugs and I slowly began to realise that he was a drug user too.

"I’d spend a lot of time in my room to get away from my dad and his friends taking drugs downstairs. He never came to tuck me in; instead he’d pass out on the sofa. I felt so lonely, and scared. I was only young, but I felt a huge sense of responsibility. Dad would give me a couple of pounds as pocket money or for food and then he’d ask for it back. He’d spend as much as £40 a day on heroin, but only £20 a fortnight on food.

"When I was about nine, a man overdosed in my house. I remember seeing him on the floor in our bathroom next to a needle, and lots of blood. I was scared and didn’t know what to do but my dad just told me to go to my room. Soon after that I was referred to the NSPCC’s FEDUP programme which does group work with children whose parents have drug or alcohol problems.

"I was a bit nervous the first time I went to the NSPCC’s FEDUP service. The nerves didn’t last long though – I loved it. We played games together with our NSPCC worker Sally\*. The games helped her find out more about what we were going through. But they also helped me escape the doom and gloom at home. Over time, I was able to get things off my chest instead of bottling my feelings up. I learnt what experiences other people in the group had as well, so I didn’t feel so alone.

"The NSPCC also taught me practical things in a fun way. I learnt what to do if there was a fire in the house. My dad had started a fire when he fell asleep on the sofa with a cigarette, so this session was really good. And we learnt first aid, like how to put our parents in the recovery position.

"Sally also encouraged us to find a trusted adult to go to when things got bad at home. For me that was my nana. I’d often stay at hers during the weekends to have a break from home. My dad wouldn’t do any washing, or buy me new clothes when I needed them so nana helped me with that. I knew I could talk to Sally about whatever was bothering me at home.

"The NSPCC gave me the consistency that was missing in my life. Going there made me want to help other people and now I’m going to university to do a social work degree. Before being helped by the FEDUP programme I wasn’t living properly, I was just going through the motions. But the NSPCC made me feel like there was a new world out there."

**Helen and Maisie’s Story**

“When my daughter Maisie\* started school she was a happy, friendly and sociable child. She excelled at school and had lots of friends. She had a very kind heart and used to live in a world where everything is lovely and there are no bad people. She was loved to bits by her dad and I.

“About a year after she started school, Maisie’s teachers started to call us in to discuss her behaviour. On various occasions Maisie’s teacher told us that Maisie wasn’t doing the work she had been set and couldn’t concentrate. Maisie was stamping her foot and growling when she was asked to do work. This kind of behaviour was completely out of character for her.

“We were getting called into her school more and more regularly as Maisie’s disruptive behaviour escalated. It was worrying because I had never seen Maisie behave in this way and she wasn’t displaying any of these behaviours at home. I noticed that after school holidays we would get called in more often than towards the end of term. It made me think that maybe Maisie was picking up the behaviour from other children she was playing with in the holidays.

“One day, after picking up Maisie from an after-school club she attended in the school holidays, I was getting her undressed at home and became worried about some marks I saw on her. Just randomly, as I have done in the past, I asked her if anyone had touched her anywhere private other than me or her father. As always, I expected her to say no but she didn’t, she said yes. She said that an adult who worked at the school and the afterschool club had touched her there.

“I was so confused; I wondered if the incident had been an accident, what had exactly happened and whether my daughter was ok. I sat down and asked her to explain exactly what had happened. She told me where the member of staff had touched her, exactly what he had done and then told me that he had hurt her and hadn’t said sorry. She had been sexually assaulted. I was shocked and numb, but disgusted and then very angry. I couldn’t comprehend that someone had assaulted my 4 1/2 year old daughter in that way.

“We reported the assault to social services, who referred Maisie to a sexual abuse clinic and the police. Maisie was questioned by the police and her clothes were sent off to be forensically tested.

“Maisie’s dad and I thought that Maisie was ok and that she hadn’t been affected by what had happened to her and hoped that she was too young to fully understand. Then a couple of weeks after she told us about the abuse she started to display very sexualised behaviour which wasn’t normal for her and certainly wasn’t normal for a 5 year old. She had become completely disengaged with school and didn’t want to do homework which she’d enjoyed before. I told the sexual abuse clinic about my concerns and Maisie’s behaviour. They recommended that Maisie do some therapeutic work with the NSPCC and she started seeing Amelia.

“I’ve seen a real change in Maisie since she started working with Amelia; she seems more assertive and ready to report wrongdoings. She’s settled in at her new school and is doing really well. She’s stopped the sexualised behaviour too. Perhaps the most telling change is that Maisie has stopped carrying around her comfort teddy. The teddy used to be her protector and look out; making sure the bad men weren’t coming again.

“We don’t know how long the sexual abuse had been going on for. Maisie’s behaviour had changed a couple of months before we found out about the abuse and, from what we understand from Maisie’s therapy, the assault she told me about wasn’t the only assault that took place.

“Maisie kept quiet about the abuse she went through because she didn’t understand what was happening to her and because she was afraid to tell anyone. I hadn’t spoken to Maisie about not letting people touch her where she wears her underwear because I had never thought anything like this would happen to my child. It wasn’t something I felt I needed to speak to her about yet. She knew that she shouldn’t go off with a stranger, but the person who sexually abused her wasn’t a stranger, he was a person of authority in her life.

“I didn’t have the language to speak to Maisie in an age appropriate way about keeping her body private or about what constituted sexual abuse. If Maisie had known that what was happening to her was wrong, then she would have spoken to me about it and we could have stopped the abuse earlier.”

**Kimberley’s Story**

"My life when I was younger wasn’t very happy. I knew from a young age that my dad was taking drugs because I’d learnt about them at school. I remember one day, when I was about 8 or 9 years old my dad’s mate came round and I saw the drugs laid out in the kitchen and I realised what they were and what they were doing.

"Living with dad wasn’t very nice. He used to get angry if he didn’t have any drugs and would shout at me. He would shout at me in the mornings because he’d overslept and we’d be late for school. I’d have to get my uniform washed and clean for school because if I left it for him to do, he’d put it in the washing machine and then forget to take it out so I wouldn’t have anything clean to wear. I was doing my own washing and ironing at primary school. Then I’d walk to school by myself. I often had to make my own dinner, because Dad would be asleep on the sofa or couldn’t do it. I’d have ravioli from a can.

"His mates would be at our flat all the time and they would make a noise at night when I was trying to sleep. If they came in the daytime they’d bring sweets for me to try and keep me out of the way. I’d be sent to my room or made to sit in the living room by myself. They used to be in the kitchen doing the drugs.

"I had met Gemma\* when I was 4 years old. She was our landlady and also worked in the shop next door. I started going into the shop to talk to Gemma instead of going home because I didn’t like to be at home with my dad.

"I would visit Gemma every day after school. I wouldn’t tell her too much about what was going on at home, but I’d tell her little things. If things were really bad with my dad I’d tell her about it and I’d sometimes stay overnight at her house. She always made time for me, it was normally when I was going to bed and she’d sit at the end of my bed and we’d talk through whatever I was worried about.

"I remember one night, my dad was asleep on the sofa and I couldn’t wake him up. The flat was dark and I was scared so I rang Gemma who came and picked me up and left a note for my dad to tell him where I’d gone.

"With Gemma’s support and help I told my school about what life was like living with my dad and I was given a social worker. The social worker helped a bit, but the biggest help was NSPCC. Anna\* and Ray\* from the NSPCC Blackpool Service Centre came to visit my house to speak to me and Dad and told me about a local group called Family Environment: Drug Using Parents ([FEDUP](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/childrens-services/family-environment-drug-using-parents-fedup/)). They said that I could go and speak to other young people who were going through something similar to me and could have 1-2-1 chats with Anna at school. Ray said he’d come to my dad’s house and talk to him about how his drug use was affecting me.

"I enjoyed the FEDUP group. We did fun things like making towers out of marshmallows and dried spaghetti. I could talk to Anna about how I was feeling and I trusted her. I was in a session with Anna when I told her I didn’t want to go home and live with my dad anymore.

"After that day, I never went back to my dad’s flat again. I saw him once after I’d left him to go and live with Gemma. We went on a day out which was nice, but he got angry when I told him I couldn’t see him again a few days later because I was busy. He swore at me and stormed off. He still wasn’t nice to be around. Now that I’m at high school, I sometimes see him in the street. He tries to say hello but I don’t like it.

"I really like living with Gemma. I’ve been to Spain with Gemma and her family. I’ve lived with her for over 2 years now.

"Being in the FEDUP group really helped me to speak out. They helped me to understand that if something doesn’t feel right then I should speak out and tell someone. To anyone living with a mum or dad who’s using drugs and making them unhappy, I’d say tell someone who you can trust and get help. It doesn’t have to be this way."