

Cruelty to a child – assault and ill treatment, abandonment, neglect, and failure to protect

Children and Young Persons Act 1933, s.1(1)

Effective from: 01 January 2019

Triable either way

Maximum: 10 years' custody

Offence range: Community order – 8 years' custody

This is a specified offence for the purposes of sections [266](#) and [279](#) (extended sentence for certain violent, sexual or terrorism offences) of the Sentencing Code.

Guideline users should be aware that the [Equal Treatment Bench Book](#) covers important aspects of fair treatment and disparity of outcomes for different groups in the criminal justice system. It provides guidance which sentencers are encouraged to take into account wherever applicable, to ensure that there is fairness for all involved in court proceedings.

Applicability

Step 1 – Determining the offence category

The court should determine the offence category with reference **only** to the factors listed in the tables below. In order to determine the category the court should assess **culpability** and **harm**.

The court should weigh all the factors set out below in determining the offender's culpability.

Where there are characteristics present which fall under different levels of culpability, the court should balance these characteristics to reach a fair assessment of the offender's culpability.

Culpability demonstrated

A High culpability

- Prolonged and/or multiple incidents of serious cruelty, including serious neglect
- Gratuitous degradation of victim and/or sadistic behaviour
- Use of very significant force
- Use of a weapon
- Deliberate disregard for the welfare of the victim
- Failure to take any steps to protect the victim from offences in which the above factors are present
- Offender with professional responsibility for the victim (where linked to the commission of the offence)

B Medium culpability

- Use of significant force
- Prolonged and/or multiple incidents of cruelty, including neglect
- Limited steps taken to protect victim in cases with category A factors present
- Other cases falling between A and C because:
 - Factors in both high and lesser categories are present which balance each other out; and/or
 - The offender's culpability falls between the factors as described in high and lesser culpability

C Lesser culpability

- Offender's responsibility substantially reduced by mental disorder or learning disability or lack of maturity
- Offender is victim of domestic abuse, including coercion and/or intimidation (where linked to the commission of the offence)
- Steps taken to protect victim but fell just short of what could reasonably be expected
- Momentary or brief lapse in judgement including in cases of neglect
- Use of some force or failure to protect the victim from an incident involving some force
- Low level of neglect

Harm

The court should consider the factors set out below to determine the level of harm that has been caused or was intended to be caused to the victim.

Psychological, developmental or emotional harm

A finding that the psychological, developmental or emotional harm is **serious** may be based on a clinical diagnosis but the court may make such a finding based on other evidence from or on behalf of the victim that serious psychological, developmental or emotional harm exists. It is

important to be clear that the absence of such a finding does **not** imply that the psychological, developmental or emotional harm suffered by the victim

Category 1

- Serious psychological, developmental, and/or emotional harm
- Serious physical harm (including illnesses contracted due to neglect)

Category 2

- Cases falling between categories 1 and 3
- A high likelihood of category 1 harm being caused

Category 3

- Little or no psychological, developmental, and/or emotional harm
- Little or no physical harm

Step 2 – Starting point and category range

Having determined the category at step one, the court should use the corresponding starting point to reach a sentence within the category range below. The starting point applies to all offenders irrespective of plea or previous convictions.

Where a case does not fall squarely within a category, adjustment from the starting point may be required before adjustment for aggravating or mitigating features.

		Culpability		
Harm		A	B	C
	Starting point	6 years' custody	3 years' custody	1 year's custody
Category 1	Category range	4 – 8 years' custody	2 – 6 years' custody	High level community order – 2 years 6 months' custody

	Starting point 3 years' custody	Starting point 1 year's custody	Starting point High level community order
Category 2	Category range 2 – 6 years' custody	Category range High level community order – 2 years 6 months' custody	Category range Medium level community order – 1 year's custody
	Starting point 1 year's custody	Starting point High level community order	Starting point Medium level community order
Category 3	Category range High level community order – 2 years 6 months' custody	Category range Medium level community order – 1 year's custody	Category range Low level community order – 6 months' custody

Community orders

Custodial sentences

The table below contains a **non-exhaustive** list of additional factual elements providing the context of the offence and factors relating to the offender. Identify whether any combination of these, or other relevant factors, should result in an upward or downward adjustment from the sentence arrived at so far. In particular, relevant recent convictions are likely to result in an upward adjustment. In some cases, having considered these factors, it may be appropriate to move outside the identified category range.

Factors increasing seriousness

Statutory aggravating factors

- Previous convictions, having regard to a) the **nature** of the offence to which the conviction relates and its **relevance** to the current offence; and b) the **time** that has elapsed since the conviction
- Offence committed whilst on bail

Other aggravating factors

- Failure to seek medical help (where not taken into account at step one)
- Commission of offence whilst under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Deliberate concealment and/or covering up of the offence
- Blame wrongly placed on others
- Failure to respond to interventions or warnings about behaviour
- Threats to prevent reporting of the offence
- Failure to comply with current court orders
- Offence committed on licence or post sentence supervision
- Offences taken into consideration
- Offence committed in the presence of another child

Factors reducing seriousness or reflecting personal mitigation

- No previous convictions **or** no relevant/recent convictions
- Remorse
- Determination and demonstration of steps having been taken to address addiction or offending behaviour, including co-operation with agencies working for the welfare of the victim
- Sole or primary carer for dependent relatives (**see step five for further guidance on parental responsibilities**)
- Good character and/or exemplary conduct
 - (where previous good character/exemplary conduct has been used to facilitate or conceal the offence, this should not normally constitute mitigation and such conduct may constitute aggravation)
- Serious medical condition requiring urgent, intensive or long-term treatment
- Mental disorder, learning disability
 - or
 - lack of maturity
 - (where not taken into account at step one)
- Co-operation with the investigation

Step 3 – Consider any factors which indicate a reduction for assistance to the prosecution

The court should take into account [section 74 of the Sentencing Code](#) (reduction in sentence for assistance to prosecution) and any other rule of law by virtue of which an offender may receive a discounted sentence in consequence of assistance given (or offered) to the prosecutor or investigator.

Step 4 – Reduction for guilty pleas

The court should take account of any potential reduction for a guilty plea in accordance with [section 73 of the Sentencing Code](#) and the [Reduction in Sentence for a Guilty Plea](#) guideline.

Step 5 – Parental responsibilities of sole or primary carers

In the majority of child cruelty cases the offender will have parental responsibility for the victim.

When considering whether to impose custody the court should step back and review whether this sentence will be in the best interests of the victim (as well as other children in the offender's care). This must be balanced with the seriousness of the offence and all sentencing options remain open to the court but careful consideration should be given to the effect that a custodial sentence could have on the family life of the victim and whether this is proportionate to the seriousness of the offence. This may be of particular relevance in lower culpability cases or where the offender has otherwise been a loving and capable parent/carer.

Where custody is unavoidable consideration of the impact on the offender's children may be relevant to the length of the sentence imposed. For more serious offences where a substantial period of custody is appropriate, this consideration will carry less weight.

Step 6 – Dangerousness

The court should consider whether having regard to the criteria contained in [Chapter 6 of Part 10 of the Sentencing Code](#) it would be appropriate to impose an extended sentence (sections [266](#) and [279](#)).

Step 7 – Totality principle

If sentencing an offender for more than one offence, or where the offender is already serving a sentence, consider whether the total sentence is just and proportionate to the overall offending behaviour in accordance with the [Totality](#) guideline.

Step 8 – Ancillary orders

In all cases the court should consider whether to make ancillary orders.

- [Ancillary orders – Magistrates' Court](#)

- [Ancillary orders – Crown Court Compendium](#)

Step 9 – Reasons

[Section 52 of the Sentencing Code](#) imposes a duty to give reasons for, and explain the effect of, the sentence.

Step 10 – Consideration for time spent on bail (tagged curfew)

The court must consider whether to give credit for time spent on bail in accordance with section 240A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and [section 325 of the Sentencing Code](#).

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