

What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse that involves the manipulation and/or coercion of young people under the age of 18 into sexual activity in exchange for things such as money, gifts, accommodation, affection or status.

The manipulation or 'grooming' process involves befriending children, gaining their trust and often feeding them drugs and alcohol, sometimes over a long period of time, before the abuse begins. The abusive relationship between victim and perpetrator involves an imbalance of power which limits the victim's options. It is a form of abuse which is often misunderstood by victims and outsiders as being consensual.

Although it is true that the victim can be tricked into believing they are in a loving relationship, no child under the age of 18 can ever consent to being abused or exploited (Barnardo's 2012). A child under the age of 13 is deemed, under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, to be legally incapable of consenting to sexual activity. For young people between the ages of 13 and 16 years the Act reinforces that, whilst mutually agreed, non-exploitative sexual activity does take place and that often no harm comes from it, the age of consent remains at 16. This group of young people are still vulnerable and should have their needs assessed.

Child sexual exploitation can manifest itself in different ways. It can involve an older perpetrator exercising financial, emotional or physical control over a young person. It can involve peers manipulating or forcing victims into sexual activity, sometimes within gangs and in gang-affected neighbourhoods, but not always. Exploitation can also involve opportunistic or organised networks of perpetrators who may profit financially from trafficking young victims between different locations to engage in sexual activity with multiple men (Barnardo's 2011).

Exploitation can also occur without physical contact when children are persuaded or forced to post indecent images of themselves online, participate in non-contact sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone, engage in sexual conversations on a mobile phone or participate in criminal activity such as drugs, theft etc.

Exploitative relationships are usually characterised by the child or young person's availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability and can have a considerable long term impact on every aspect of their life, health and education.

Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are responsible for ensuring that appropriate local procedures are in place to tackle child exploitation. All frontline practitioners need to be aware of these procedures (including those for 'early help') and how they relate to their own areas of responsibility. LSCBs and frontline practitioners should ensure that actions to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people who are exploited focus on the needs of that child (whether their exploitation has been sexual or whether by association/membership of gangs and groups).

Who is at Risk?

Children and young people who have fallen victim to this kind of exploitative sexual activity will often be reticent about reporting abuse; their reason for 'not telling' might include fear of recrimination from perpetrators, the fear that they were in some way complicit in the abuse (and therefore responsible themselves for what happened to them), fearful of rejection, shame and marginalisation from their familial/friendship or community relationships and associations, that they do not know who to tell, or whether they will even be believed.

Whilst we can **all** be susceptible to the exploitative actions of others, the children, young people (and adults) most at risk will be those vulnerable individuals whose life experiences and support systems have left them with little or no confidence or sense of worth. Many will have experienced abandonment, have witnessed, or been exposed to, domestic violence, parental mental ill health/substance and alcohol misuse and/or physical and emotional abuse and neglectful care and attention in early childhood.

Research informs us that there are a range of indicators which may contribute to a child or young person's vulnerability to exploitation and these include:

- Children who go 'missing' for periods of time, who regularly return home late, or who are inexplicably absent from their familial home, care placement or school/college facility. (This might reasonably include children who have been formally 'excluded' from their educational provision).
- Children who have new clothes, phones, jewellery, or money that cannot plausibly be accounted for.
- Children who have peers or friends who are also involved in exploitation and who associate with or are in relationships with older boyfriends/girlfriends or known adults of concern.
- Children who present with recurrent/repeating sexual health issues, where there is evidence or suspicion that they are involved in the misuse of drugs/alcohol or where they display inappropriate sexualised behaviours.
- Children who are exhibiting changes in temperament/depression/mood swings, changes in emotional wellbeing or sudden changes in their physical presentation.
- Children who have a history of abuse (including familial child sexual abuse, risk of forced marriage, risk of honour based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect).
- Children who have unsupervised use of social networking chat room/sites.
- Children who have low self-esteem or confidence or are being bullied.

This is not an exhaustive list, nor have the vulnerabilities been listed in order of importance.

Children from loving and secure homes can also be the victims of sexual exploitation. The characteristics common to all victims are not always their age, ethnicity, disability, or sexual orientation, but their powerlessness and vulnerability.

Exploitative others, whether adult perpetrator or peer, acting alone or in association with others, will use variations of grooming methodologies in a variety of settings and forums and will include internet access (social media sites, online gaming communities, mobile phones/technology etc.) to gain access to their target/s.

The LSCB has developed a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) toolkit that provides support and information on the potential signs and symptoms of CSE and this is available on the LSCB website <http://www.suffolkscb.org.uk/procedures/lscb-policies-guidance-and-protocols/child-sexual-exploitation-cse/> .

The toolkit provides a comprehensive overview of potential warning signs to look out for.

Responding to CSE

The most important consideration is the safety and protection of any child who is being or may be sexually exploited. Any immediate action to safeguard a child or young person must be taken in the first instance.

If you think you are dealing with a child or young person who is being sexually exploited or is at risk of sexual exploitation, advice should be sought from your safeguarding lead as soon as possible and the LSCB toolkit should be used to assist you in assessing the level of risk.

Investigating CSE

CSE is not a specific criminal offence. It encompasses a range of different forms of serious criminal conduct and a number of individual offences.

In assessing whether a child or young person is a victim, or at risk of becoming a victim, of sexual exploitation, careful consideration should be given to the following:

- A child under the age of 13 is not legally capable of consenting to sex (it is statutory rape) or any other type of sexual touching.
- Sexual activity with a child under 16 is an offence.
- It is an offence for a person to have a sexual relationship with a 16 or 17-year old if they hold a position of trust or authority in relation to them.
- Where sexual activity with a 16 or 17-year old does not result in an offence being committed, it may still result in harm or the likelihood of harm being suffered.
- Non-consensual sex is rape, whatever the age of the victim.
- If the victim is incapacitated through drink or drugs, or the victim, or his or her family, has been subjected to violence or the threat of it, they cannot be considered to have given true consent and therefore offences may have been committed.
- CSE is an issue for all children under the age of 18 years and not limited to those in a specific age group.

CSE investigations require a proactive approach to explore the nature and patterns of sexual exploitation locally and to share information with partner agencies about those at risk and potential offenders.

Police Investigators will liaise with the Crown Prosecution Service at the earliest opportunity to seek appropriate advice as this can help to outline an effective investigative strategy, which will strengthen the prosecution case.

Legislation

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced a range of offences that recognised the grooming, coercion and control of children.

- [Section 14](#) arranging or facilitating a child sex offence (child under 16).
- [Section 15](#) meeting a child following sexual grooming (child under 16).
- [Section 47](#) paying for the sexual services of a child.
- [Section 48](#) causing or inciting child prostitution or pornography.
- [Section 49](#) controlling a child prostitute or a child involved in pornography.
- [Section 50](#) arranging or facilitating child prostitution or pornography.
- [Section 57](#), [Section 58](#) and [Section 59](#) trafficking into, within or out of the UK for sexual exploitation.

Delayed Reporting of CSE

Children and young people who are sexually abused or exploited often find it difficult to report their ordeal at the time the incident occurred. This may be because of fear of not being believed or feeling ashamed about what has happened to them. They may also not realise they are a victim.

It is, therefore, not surprising that some allegations of sexual abuse and/or exploitation are reported a considerable period of time after the abuse took place. This could be due to the victim deciding that they have the courage to report their abuse and wanting to make authorities aware.

It can take a victim of sexual abuse/exploitation years to summon up the courage to report what has happened to them to the authorities. The validity of an allegation should not be doubted just because there is a delay between when the crime(s) took place and when it is reported.

Practitioners should be aware that initial disclosures are usually incomplete. Victims might choose to leave the worst disclosure until last, to test whether they will be believed. It can take time to develop trust and encourage full disclosure.

Victims Presenting as Suspects

Sometimes, CSE victims commit criminal offences. This might be in an attempt to pay back money 'owed' to the perpetrator, to purposely attract the attention of law enforcement in an attempt to get away from the exploitative situation they are in and/or as a means of 'surviving'. In some cases victims may appear to be part of the offending by recruiting others into the exploitation. This may occur in an attempt to deflect some, if not all, of the abuse onto others. Practitioners should look beyond the obvious facts when a child or young person is presented to them as an offender, or has been arrested for a criminal offence (or repeated offences).

Resources

There is a wealth of informative and readily accessible safety material available both in print and online, for practitioners, parents, children and young people which includes fact sheets, guidance on e-safety, interactive exercises and video/film clips. Suffolk County Council provides face to face training to multi-agency practitioners on Child Sexual Exploitation through CPD online.

The links chosen below have been researched by members of the Suffolk Exploited Children Strategic Group and the 'Make a Change' Team who have found them to be useful.

e-Safety

The aim of '[e-Safer Suffolk](#)' is to raise the awareness of children, young people, families, vulnerable adults and those who work with them, about e-safety issues and how to safely navigate the internet.

The [e-safety advice](#) page gives tips and information about how you can safely enjoy being online, gaming, shopping, chatting, using social media like Facebook and the many other activities that adults, parents and carers, children and young people get involved in on the net. You will also find help about how to create an e-safety lead for your organisation and get access to [e-safety guidance and model policies](#) for school/colleges and multi-agency organisations.

If you have an immediate concern about a child or vulnerable adult, please follow [this advice](#). If you're concerned about something that you've seen on the internet or behaviour that your child has experienced whilst online - [report the abuse to CEOP](#).

Sexting

The South West Grid for Learning Trust <http://www.swgfl.org.uk> is a charitable trust company that produces a brilliant leaflet entitled 'So you got naked online' <http://swgfl.org.uk/products-services/esafety/resources/So-You-Got-Naked-Online>

The leaflet gives the following explanation for sexting.

'Sexting is a term which describes the sharing of intimate images of yourself with others, using technologies like MMS, IM, BBM and social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, YouTube etc.

It can happen when your judgement is clouded (e.g. pressure from someone else, alcohol or drugs) and can result in you:

- Sending accidentally.
- Being brave about a naughty photograph.
- Feeling sexually confident.
- Feeling less inhibited and less aware of risk and consequences.
- Doing it as a dare.
- Thinking that it is a good laugh and there is no harm in it.

Whilst the creation and distribution of indecent images is illegal, the police have stated that young people should be treated as victims in the first instance and should not usually face prosecution. The priority for the police is to identify, apprehend and prosecute those who profit from the circulation of sexual images of young people.

Grooming and Sexual Exploitation – Messages for Boys

Yorkshire MESMAC is one of the oldest and largest sexual health organisations in the country. Their historical focus is HIV prevention and sexual health promotion. Yorkshire MESMAC is part of a group of services that include The BLAST! Project; one of whose service areas is a dedicated team that works exclusively with young men and boys involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, sexual exploitation.

The BLAST project publishes a leaflet entitled '***It happens to boys too***'. The leaflet covers a wide range of information including '*What is Sexual Exploitation and what are the Myths?*', '*Top Tips to Keeping Safe*', '*Am I at risk?*' and '*Why Boys Don't Report*'. It is available to download and print. The BLAST project website can be found on www.mesmac.co.uk/blast.

Family Planning has a lot of good information and advice for parents as well as professionals and leaflets can be bought at reasonable prices, including 'Is this love?' <http://www.fpa.org.uk/>

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation <http://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/> is the organisation that 'Make A Change' use extensively and specifically the 'Stop it Now' campaign: <http://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>

'Parents Protect' has many useful links for parents and children to use together.

http://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/internet_safety_links.htm

Safer Internet <http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/> has lots of information for parents, children and young people aged 11-19. It includes links to literature, video chats and webcams, '*So you got naked online*' a sexting guide and Social Media checklists:

<http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/young-people/11-19s> .

<http://www.digizen.org/kids/> has a raft of information and advice, workbooks etc. for young people to explore about keeping safe online.

<http://www.childline.org.uk> has a link to a chat line which young people can use if they choose not to talk to anyone face to face.

www.thesource.me.uk/search-for-help-support-and-services/being-in-a-safe-and-healthy-relationship/ provides information about being in a safe and healthy relationship.

www.thesource.me.uk/life-online which has a huge amount of information about being online, including e-safety, trolling, cyberbullying, sexting, gaming etc.

<http://www.ccpas.co.uk/Documents/Help-SomeoneTalkTo.pdf> is a good booklet to give to anyone who is thinking about talking to someone about being abused.

The Safer Internet Centre has been funded by the European Commission to provide a Helpline for professionals who work with children and young people in the UK, specifically tackling the area of e-safety. The Helpline provides support with all aspects of digital and online issues such as social networking sites, cyberbullying, sexting, online gaming and child protection online. The Helpline aims to resolve issues professionals face about themselves, such as protecting professional identity and reputation, as well as young people in relation to online safety.

The Helpline is open **Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm** but can be emailed at any time, and messages will be responded to during their normal working hours.

<http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/about/helpline>

Further Resources/Information

Local Safeguarding Children Board: [Safeguarding Children Who Run Away or Go Missing from Home or Care Policy](#):

Suffolk Local Safeguarding Children Board: [Child Sexual Exploitation](#)

Suffolk Local Safeguarding Children Board: [Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked Policy](#):

NICE (2004) Self Harm: <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG16FullGuideline.pdf>

National CAMHS Support Services (2011), [Self-Harm in Children and Young People Handbook](#): <http://www.chimat.org.uk/resource/item.aspx?RID=105602>

Further information about all Suffolk Safeguarding Children Board publications can be found on our website. www.suffolkscb.org.uk