Protecting children from sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (Department for Education, 2017; NIdirect, 2021; Scottish Government, 2018; Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board, 2020a).

Children and young people in sexually exploitative situations and relationships are persuaded or forced to perform sexual activities or have sexual activities performed on them in return for gifts, drugs, money or affection.

CSE can take place in person, online, or using a combination of both.

Perpetrators of CSE use a power imbalance to exploit children and young people. This may arise from a range of factors including:

- age
- gender
- sexual identity
- cognitive ability
- physical strength
- status
- access to economic or other resources (Department of Education, 2017).

Sexual exploitation is a hidden crime. Young people have often been groomed into trusting their abuser and may not understand that they're being abused. They may depend on their abuser and be too scared to tell anyone what's happening because they don't want to get them in trouble or risk losing them. They may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship.

Some children and young people are trafficked into or within the UK for sexual exploitation.

Child sexual exploitation online

When sexual exploitation happens online, young people may be persuaded or forced to:

- have sexual conversations by text or online
- send or post sexually explicit images of themselves
- take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017).

Abusers may threaten to send images, video or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in further sexual activity. Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the sexual abuse has stopped.

Impact of child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can have long-term effects on young people's wellbeing, impacting on their life into adulthood.

Some difficulties faced by children and young people who have been sexually exploited include:

- isolation from family and friends
- falling behind on schoolwork, failing exams or dropping out of school altogether
- teenage parenthood
- unemployment
- mental health problems
- alcohol and drug addiction
- having a criminal record
- suicidal thoughts and attempts

(Parents against child sexual abuse, 2013; Safe and Sound, 2013; Berelowitz et al, 2012).

Impact of online child sexual exploitation

Research suggests that online child sexual abuse can have as much of an impact on a child as abuse that only takes place offline and can lead to the same psychological difficulties (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017). Effects can include:

- self-blame
- flashbacks or intrusive thoughts
- difficulties sleeping
- nightmares
- extreme tiredness
- difficulties concentrating
- difficulties keeping up with school work
- behavioural problems at school
- depression
- low self-esteem
- social withdrawal
- panic attacks and anxiety
- eating disorder or eating difficulties
- self-harm

(Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017).

Digital technology makes it possible to be contacted at any time – day or night. Contact at night increases the abuser's control over the child's life and increases secrecy around the abuse itself. A child may feel powerless, like there is no escape from the abuse (Munro, 2011; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017).

"Over the last year I have been groomed by a man who lives in America. I have sent him pictures and other things and I know he exploits many other girls. He gives us hush money and threatens to send your family the pictures if you refuse to do as he asks. I am too scared to contact the police."
Childline counselling session with a girl aged 16

If children have been sexually exploited and evidence is shared online (such as explicit images), they are being abused again every time somebody views it. As it's very difficult to track and remove online images, it can be very traumatic for young people and make it very difficult for them to move forward following the abuse.

Recognising child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can be very difficult to identify. Warning signs can easily be mistaken for 'normal' teenage behaviour.

Behavioural indicators

Children and young people who are being sexually exploited may display certain behaviours:

- displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour for their age
- being fearful of certain people and/or situations
- displaying significant changes in emotional wellbeing
- being isolated from peers/usual social networks
- being increasingly secretive
- having money or new things (such as clothes or a mobile phone) that they can't explain
- spending time with older individuals or groups
- being involved with gangs and/or gang fights
- calling an older person their 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'
- missing school and/or falling behind with schoolwork
- persistently returning home late
- returning home under the influence of drugs/alcohol
- going missing from home or care
- being involved in petty crime such as shoplifting
- spending a lot of time at hotels or places of concern, such as known brothels
- not knowing where they are, because they have been trafficked around the country (Department for Education, 2017).

Physical signs include:

- unexplained physical injuries and other signs of physical abuse
- changed physical appearance - for example, weight loss
- scars from self-harm (Department for Education, 2017).

Repeat sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations can also be a sign of CSE (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014).

Risks and vulnerability factors

Child sexual exploitation can happen to any child or young person. But research has identified certain factors that may make a child or young person more vulnerable to CSE. These include:

- low self-esteem or self-confidence
- lacking friends from the same age group
- being a young carer
- being in or leaving care
- a history of abuse, particularly sexual abuse
- recent bereavement or loss
- homelessness
- links to a gang through relatives, peers or intimate relationships
- living in a gang-affected neighbourhood (Department for Education, 2017).

There are some factors affecting LGBTQ+ children and young people that can put them at risk of sexual exploitation. For example, they don't always receive relevant sex and relationships education and may not be able to find safe spaces where they can meet peers. If the young person feels isolated and unsupported, they may go online and/or build relationships with strangers. This can mean they are more easily influenced by exploitative adults (Barnardo's, 2016).

Perpetrators of child sexual exploitation

CSE can be perpetrated by:

- individuals or groups
- males or females
- children or adults.

The abuse can be a one-off occurrence or a series of incidents over time and range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse (Department for Education, 2017).

Identifying perpetrators is difficult because:

- data isn't always recorded or is inconsistent or incomplete
- children and young people may only know their abuser by an alias, nickname or appearance
- victims may be 'passed between' abusers and assaulted by multiple perpetrators
- children and young people are often moved from location to location and abused in each place
- young people may be given alcohol or drugs, so may not remember details clearly (Berelowitz et al, 2012).

People who sexually exploit children are often described as highly manipulative individuals. They exert power over young people through physical violence, emotional blackmail or financial pressure, for example holding them in debt.

Perpetrators may use one victim to gain access to others, persuading or forcing a child or young person to bring their friends along to pre-arranged meetings or 'parties'. In some cases, if a child or young person tries to break free, the perpetrator will use their peers to draw them back in (Child Exploitation and Online Protection command (CEOP), 2011).

Responding to child sexual exploitation

Reporting

If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns.

- **Follow your organisational child protection procedures**.
- **Contact the NSPCC Helpline** on 0808 800 5000 or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk. Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.
- **Contact your local child protection services**. Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.
- **Contact the police.**

Services will risk assess the situation and take action to protect the child as appropriate either through statutory involvement or other support. This may include making a referral to the local authority.

Removing explicit images

You should take steps to report and remove evidence of online child sexual exploitation, such as explicit images.

- Report the image to the site or network hosting it.
- Contact the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF).
- Young people under 18 who are worried that a sexual image or video of them may have been shared online can use Childline and IWF's Report Remove tool to see if it can be taken down.

Assessment

When assessing the risk of CSE, it's important for professionals to:

- take a collaborative and supportive approach
- remember that the victim is not to blame
- use professional judgement
- gather as much narrative information as possible - this helps to see the bigger picture and understand risk and protective factors
- include all potential indicators of risk such as:
    - online/social media communication
    - gaming
    - drug and/or alcohol use
    - gang involvement
    - deprivation/poverty
    - disability
    - sexual interests and attitudes
- focus on factors that may put a child at risk of harm, rather than assessing incidents that have already taken place
- make sure the tool you're using is appropriate for the child (some risk assessment tools don't contain indicators for boys, younger children and disabled children)
- look at protective factors or strengths of young people, their families and their immediate environment

- make sure professionals are trained to assess the risk of CSE - it may also be useful to provide lists of risk and protective indicators to help less experienced staff (Brown et al, 2017).

Preventing child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can be stopped. To prevent CSE and keep children safe, it's vital to:

- raise awareness of the signs of CSE

- teach children and young people about healthy relationships

- make sure everyone knows how to report concerns (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014).

Community awareness

Building community awareness of what CSE is and the signs to watch for is key to help keep children and young people safe. Communities can be the strongest allies in protecting children from exploitation (Coffey at al, 2014).

We are working with communities and local authorities across the UK to raise awareness of CSE and to inform young people, professionals and parents about the risks. If you are looking to develop an initiative or campaign, do get in touch with us.

Multi-agency approach

Sharing information across agencies/organisations is key to identifying early indicators of CSE – for example, a child or young person missing from home, school or care – and taking action to support children at risk (Coffey and Lloyd, 2014).

It's important that all partners take responsibility for their roles, work collaboratively with each other and have a shared understanding of how to tackle CSE (HM Inspectorate of Probation, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), Care Quality Commission, and Ofsted, 2016).
Best practice for multi-agency responses to CSE includes:

- working together to map CSE in the local area – identifying which children are at risk and what the patterns of abuse are

- raising awareness of CSE

- working together to support young people at risk of CSE (HM Inspectorate of Probation, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), Care Quality Commission, and Ofsted, 2016).

Empowering parents

Parents have a vital role to play in safeguarding their child from CSE. They are often the first to identify signs that something is wrong with their child (Parents against child sexual abuse, 2016). So it's essential that practitioners ensure parents receive information on the early warning signs of CSE. When these signs appear, parents can then share information with the police, which can help to identify perpetrators and be successful in prosecuting them (Parents against child sexual abuse, 2016).

It's also essential for agencies and specialist organisations to provide non-judgemental support to parents - to listen, understand, respect and value the contributions parents can make in safeguarding their child (Parents against child sexual abuse, 2016).

Keeping children safe online

Children can be vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the online world. There are actions parents, carers and organisations can take to keep online spaces safe for children.

Direct work with children who have experienced child sexual exploitation

Children who have experienced CSE may have extremely complex needs. Our therapeutic service can help those who have been sexually exploited move forward from their experience.

Letting the Future In (LTFI): this evidence-based programme helps children who have been sexually abused get back on track. The programme has also been adapted for children age 4-19 with a disability.

We evaluated LTFI and learned that it resulted in positive changes for children, including:

- improved mood
- better confidence
- reduction in guilt and self-blame
- reduced depression, anxiety and anger
- improved sleep patterns

- better understanding of appropriate sexual behaviour (Carpernter, 2016).

We're supporting other organisations to deliver Letting the Future In. This includes successfully training social care professionals to deliver therapeutic work.

Key legislation

In the UK it is illegal to:

- cause or incite a child to engage in sexual activity
- arrange or facilitate a child sex offence
- meet a child following sexual grooming
- have sexual communication with a child
- take, make or have indecent photographs of children
- sexually exploit a child (including paying for or arranging sexual services of a child)

(Serious Crime Act 2015; Sexual Offences Act 2003; Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015; Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008; Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009; Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005).

Trafficking and modern slavery legislation across the UK makes it an offence to traffic and/or enslave children for sexual exploitation and makes provisions for sentencing offenders. These can also apply to trafficking children for online sexual exploitation.

Investigating child sexual exploitation

In **England** and **Wales**, under Section 116 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, police can require hotels and similar establishments where they believe child sexual exploitation is taking place to provide information about their guests. This is intended to help police investigate sexual offences committed in these types of establishments.

Improving the justice system

In **Scotland**, the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016 aims to improve the justice system's response to abusive behaviour and sexual harm. Under the Act, judges must give special information to guide juries in certain sexual offence trials, to challenge any preconceptions jurors may have about how sexual assaults take place.

Key guidance

In **England**, the Child sexual exploitation guidance (PDF) provides non-statutory advice to help practitioners, local leaders and decision makers who work with children and families to identify and respond to CSE (Department for Education, 2017).

In **Northern Ireland**, Child sexual exploitation: definition and guidance (PDF) and Child sexual exploitation: a guide for those working with children and young people (PDF) help professionals and those working with children to recognise the signs of CSE and know how to respond (Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland 2014a and 2014b).

In **Scotland**, sections 572-584 of the National guidance for child protection in Scotland (PDF) provide indicators of CSE and guidance on how professionals and staff who work with children should respond (Scottish Government, 2014b).

In **Wales**, Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation is statutory guidance on understanding, preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation. The guidance is for safeguarding board partners and organisations such as local authorities, the police, health and education services and voluntary groups (Welsh Government, 2021).

The Wales Safeguarding Procedures include a practice guide on safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation (Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board, 2020a).

The Home Office has published a Child exploitation disruption toolkit to help frontline staff and safeguarding partners in **England** and **Wales** understand their legislative powers and use best practice to disrupt the sexual and criminal exploitation of children and young people (Home Office, 2019).

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Home Office have published voluntary interim codes on tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The codes apply to technology companies that host user-generated content and enable social interaction between users, including social media companies and search engines (DCMS and Home Office, 2020b).

Practice principles, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), have been published by The Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme. The principles are for all professionals working with children

around effective partnership working when responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (TCE Support Programme, 2023).

Prosecution guidance

In **England** and **Wales**, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) provides guidelines on prosecuting cases of child sexual abuse, which includes information about recognising and responding to CSE (CPS, 2020).

Children and young people going missing from home or care

In **England** the Department for Education (DfE) has provided statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care (PDF). This outlines the action that local authorities and their partners should take to prevent children from going missing and to protect those who do from risks such as CSE. A flowchart highlighting the main steps to take has also been published (DfE, 2014a and 2014b).

In **Northern Ireland** the Runaway and missing from home and care: missing children protocol (PDF) provides guidance for the police and health and social care agencies to work together to respond to children who go missing and protecting them from such risks as CSE. The protocol includes questions to assist in decision making (Health and Social Care Board and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2015).

In **Scotland** the National missing person's framework for Scotland (PDF) provides guidance for a multi-agency response when an individual goes missing, outlining roles and responsibilities and including questions to use in risk assessment for concerns such as sexual exploitation (Scottish Government, 2017).

In **Wales**, the All Wales Practice Guide on safeguarding children who go missing from home or care provides guidance to carers, police officers, social workers, education and other relevant agencies for handling situations where children go missing. A child information form is included in the protocol (Wales Safeguarding Procedures Project Board, 2020b).

Key policy

Tackling and preventing child sexual exploitation

In **England** and **Wales**, Tackling child sexual exploitation (PDF) sets out how the government is dealing with child sexual exploitation. It includes

actions for healthcare, social care, education, law enforcement and criminal justice agencies (Home Office, 2015). A progress report has since been published to give an update on the actions taken to date and sets out next steps to achieve objectives around:

- tackling offending
- reducing young people's vulnerability
- supporting victims and survivors (Home Office, 2017).

The Tackling violence against women and girls strategy includes actions to tackle sexual exploitation (Home Office, 2021). The elements of the Strategy which relate to crime, policing and justice apply to **England** and **Wales**. The elements relating to health, social care, and education apply to **England** only.

In **Northern Ireland**, the report of the Independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland (PDF) makes recommendations for future actions required by social services, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation. The recommendations focus on:

- prevention
- investigating and prosecuting cases
- supporting recovery for survivors (Marshall, 2014).

Two progress reports have been published to give an update on implementing the Marshall report recommendations (DHSSPS, 2016).

The Northern Irish government has set out its approach to preventing sexual abuse in Stopping domestic and sexual violence and abuse in Northern Ireland: a seven year strategy (PDF) (DHSSPS and Department of Justice, 2016). It is highlighted that whilst the response to CSE in Northern Ireland is a separate piece of work, it may dovetail with future actions taken forward under the Strategy.

In **Scotland**, the Child sexual exploitation action plan sets out the Government's plan to tackle the issue of child sexual exploitation. It focuses on:

- prevention of abuse
- prosecution

- supporting children and young people affected by child sexual exploitation (Scottish Government, 2014a).

A final progress report has been published to give an update on the delivery of actions from the plan since 2016 and the ongoing activity to continue Scotland's commitment to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation (Scottish Government, 2020).

Keep up to date with new legislation and guidance by signing up to CASPAR, our current awareness service for policy, practice and research.

References and resources

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Elearning

Our elearning courses can help develop your understanding of how to protect children from abuse:

- Introduction to safeguarding and child protection
- Child protection in schools
- Child protection in sport
- Online safety
- Harmful sexual behaviour in schools

Further reading

For further reading about child sexual exploitation, search the NSPCC Library catalogue using the keyword "child sexual exploitation".

Support for children and young people

Childline provides information and advice for young people about healthy and unhealthy relationships. It has also created animated videos about:

- sexual exploitation
- grooming
- trafficking.

Young people under 18 who are worried that a sexual image or video of them may have been shared online can use Childline and IWF's Report

Remove tool to see if it can be taken down. The tool can be used with the support from a trusted adult, and support is available from Childline.

Related NSPCC resources

Read our learning from case reviews about child sexual exploitation.

Read the evaluation of our Letting the Future In programme.

Read our report about the impact of online and offline sexual abuse.

Read our NSPCC helplines report about responding to children's and parents' concerns about sexual content online.

View our resources for schools about promoting healthy relationships.