

Guidance - Child Sexual Exploitation

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 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).

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).

This abuse often involves violent and degrading sexual assaults and rape. 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, or engage in sexual conversations on a mobile phone (DfE, 2011).

Technology is widely used by perpetrators as a method of grooming and coercing victims, often through social networking sites and mobile devices (Jago et al, 2011). This form of abuse usually occurs in private, or in semi-public places such as parks, cinemas, cafes and hotels. It is increasingly occurring at 'parties' organised by perpetrators for the purposes of giving victims drugs and alcohol before sexually abusing them (Barnardo's, 2012).

How much child sexual exploitation is there?

It is not possible to say exactly how many young people are victims of child sexual exploitation for a number of reasons. It is described as a 'hidden' form of abuse which leaves victims confused, frightened and reluctant to make any disclosures. Some young people are not even aware they are experiencing abuse as the perpetrator has manipulated them into believing they are in a loving relationship, or that they are dependent on their abuser for There is also no recognised category of abuse for sexual exploitation in child protection procedures and data relating to CSE cases is often partial, incomplete, concealed in other categories of data, or simply unrecorded. In addition, when perpetrators are convicted for involvement in child sexual exploitation cases, it is for associated offences such as sexual activity with a child - there is no specific crime of child sexual exploitation.

What are the signs and symptoms of child sexual exploitation?

Grooming and sexual exploitation can be very difficult to identify. Warning signs can easily be mistaken for 'normal' teenage behaviour and/or development. However, parents, carers, school teachers and practitioners are advised to be alert to the following signs and symptoms:

- inappropriate sexual or sexualised behaviour
- underage sexual activity
- sexually risky behaviour, 'swapping' sex
- repeat sexually transmitted infections; in girls repeat pregnancy, abortions, miscarriage
- having unaffordable new things (clothes, mobile) or expensive habits (alcohol, drugs)
- changes in the way they dress
- going to hotels or other unusual locations to meet friends
- seen at known places of concern
- getting in/out of different cars driven by unknown adults
- going missing from home or care
- having older boyfriends or girlfriends
- having multiple mobile phones and worrying about losing contact via mobile
- associating with other young people involved in sexual exploitation
- truancy, exclusion, disengagement with school, opting out of education altogether
- unexplained changes in behaviour or personality (chaotic, aggressive, sexual)
- drug or alcohol misuse
- getting involved in crime
- moving around the country, appearing in new towns or cities, not knowing where they are
- contact with known perpetrators
- injuries from physical assault, physical restraint, sexual assault
- involved in abusive relationships, intimidated and fearful of certain people or situations
- hanging out with groups of older people, or anti- social groups, or with other vulnerable peers
- recruiting other young people to exploitative situations
- unexplained changes in behaviour or personality (chaotic, aggressive, sexual)

Particularly vulnerable to CSE are children in local authority care and care leavers, children missing, children in gangs and those involved in peer to peer abuse.

What is the impact of child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation can have a devastating impact on a victim's health, happiness and development. It can also have profound long-term effects on young people's social integration and economic well-being and adversely affects life chances. Some of the difficulties faced by victims include:

- isolation from family and friends
- teenage parenthood
- failing examinations or dropping out of education altogether
- unemployment
- mental health problems

- suicide attempts
- alcohol and drug addiction
- aggressive behaviour
- criminal activity

Young victims may need intensive multi-agency support to mitigate the long-term damage inflicted by this abuse.

What to do if CSE is suspected:

Child sexual exploitation is child abuse, so child protection procedures must be followed if anyone suspects that a young person is a victim or is at risk of becoming a victim. It is important that agencies work together and share information in order to deal with child sexual exploitation. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should have a CSE strategy in place and appoint a lead person responsible for co-ordinating a multi-agency response.

Police can also disrupt exploitation by issuing 'abduction notices' when they become aware that a child is spending time with an adult who could be harmful to them, for example if there is existing intelligence suggesting the adult has a sexual interest in children, or if parents report a child missing and the child is found at a particular individual's address.

- Follow local child protection procedures
- Refer to the Local Safeguarding Children Board for the LA's CSE strategy and guidance document or protocol, which will specify the local thresholds for intervention
- Implement awareness raising initiatives via assemblies, displays, student council and PSHE lessons
- Implement awareness raising initiatives with parents/carers via workshops, newsletters, school website and policies and procedures
- Contact the NSPCC for advice, guidance and to make a referral if the LA's children social care services is not possible
0808 800 5000 or emailing help@nspcc.org.uk.
- Do not confront the perpetrator as this will give them opportunity to threaten the child about speaking out about the abuse. It may also place the child in danger.
- If a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on **999**, or call the NSPCC on **0808 800 5000**, without delay.