

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS: Identification of children at risk of sexual exploitation (March 2013)

A recent inquiry undertaken by the Office of the Children's Commissioner reported that at least 16,500 children were identified as being at risk of children sexual exploitation during one year.¹ The same research also estimates that the actual numbers of children at risk of and suffering child sexual exploitation are much higher because professionals in the study did not always recognise and respond appropriately to the issue. Schools are well placed to prevent, identify and respond to children at risk of sexual exploitation. This guidance aims to raise the awareness of child sexual exploitation in order to support education professionals to identify and respond appropriately to pupils at risk.

What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

The sexual exploitation of children and young people (CSE) under-18 is defined as that which:

'involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities.

Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.' (Department for Education, 2012)

Child sexual exploitation is a form of abuse which involves children (male and female, of different ethnic origins and of different ages) receiving something in exchange for sexual activity.

Who is at risk?

Child sexual exploitation can happen to any young person from any background. Although the research suggests that the females are more vulnerable to CSE, boys and young men are also victims of this type of abuse.

The characteristics common to all victims of CSE are not those of age, ethnicity or gender, rather their powerlessness and vulnerability. Victims often do not recognise that they are being exploited because they will have been

¹ "I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world." The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs & Groups: Interim Report (November 2012)

groomed by their abuser(s). As a result, victims do not make informed choices to enter into, or remain involved in, sexually exploitative situations but do so from coercion, enticement, manipulation or fear. Sexual exploitation can happen face to face and it can happen online. It can also occur between young people.

In all its forms, CSE is child abuse and should be treated as a child protection issue.

WARNING SIGNS AND VULNERABILITIES CHECKLIST²

The evidence available points to several factors that can increase a child's vulnerability to being sexually exploited. The following are typical **vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse**:

- Living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance use, domestic violence, parental mental health issues, parental criminality)
- History of abuse (including familial child sexual abuse, risk of forced marriage, risk of 'honour'-based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect)
- Recent bereavement or loss
- Gang association either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships (in cases of gang-associated CSE only)
- Attending school with young people who are sexually exploited
- Learning disabilities
- Unsure about their sexual orientation or unable to disclose sexual orientation to their families
- Friends with young people who are sexually exploited
- Homeless
- Lacking friends from the same age group
- Living in a gang neighbourhood
- Living in residential care
- Living in hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation or a foyer
- Low self-esteem or self-confidence
- Young carer

The following signs and behaviour are generally seen in children who are **already being sexually exploited**.

- Missing from home or care
- Physical injuries
- Drug or alcohol misuse
- Involvement in offending
- Repeat sexually-transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations

² The Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012) Interim Report - Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Group and Gangs.

- Absent from school
- Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites
- Estranged from their family
- Receipt of gifts from unknown sources
- Recruiting others into exploitative situations
- Poor mental health
- Self-harm
- Thoughts of or attempts at suicide

Evidence shows that any child displaying several vulnerabilities from the above lists should be considered to be at high risk of sexual exploitation. If you identify a child who you consider to be suffering from or a high risk of CSE, it is important that the Senior Designated Professional in school is informed so that they can contact Children's Services.

Consent?

The report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner also highlights confusion about issues of consent to sexual activity amongst professionals *and* victims of CSE. Professionals frequently described victims of sexual exploitation as being 'promiscuous', 'liking the glamour', engaging in 'risky behaviour' and generally presenting with challenging behaviour.

In assessing whether a child or young person is a victim of sexual exploitation, or at risk of becoming a victim, careful consideration should be given to the issue of consent. It is important to bear in mind that:

- 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 also 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; and
- if the victim is incapacitated through drink or drugs, or the victim or his or her family has been subject to violence or the threat of it, they cannot be considered to have given true consent and therefore offences may have been committed.

Child sexual exploitation is therefore potentially a child protection issue for all children under the age of 18 years and not just those in a specific age group.

What should schools do to tackle Child Sexual Exploitation?

Training and Awareness

The SDP should ensure that all staff and volunteers who work with children and young people are made aware of Child Sexual Exploitation and the

indicators of concern in order to identify and respond to concerns at an early stage. In addition to providing this written guidance to staff, training materials regarding Child Sexual Exploitation are included in the Norfolk County Council [whole school safeguarding training package](#).

Prevention

Educational institutions play an important role in helping children and young people gain an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable relationships and sexual behaviour and to gain a sense of self-worth and respect for others. The PSHE curriculum, including Sex and Relationship Education (SRE), provides a vehicle for this important learning which can help prevent children and young people becoming involved in sexual exploitation.

By enabling children and young people to explore what makes a safe and healthy relationship, schools can help to develop the awareness and skills to recognise and manage potential risks of harm, stay safe and seek help if they need it. It is important that this message is repeated throughout a child's time at school to support prevention through the promotion of safe practices. Both primary and secondary schools have a vital role to play in this preventive education and awareness raising.

Identification

What to do if you are concerned about a child:

If you have concerns that a child is at risk of or suffering Child Sexual Exploitation you should contact Children's Services without delay on 0344 800 8020.

In all referrals and consultations with other agencies, it is important that you are clear that you believe the child is at risk of or is a victim of sexual exploitation.

Further Guidance & Resources:

[**"I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world." The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs & Groups: Interim Report \(November 2012\)**](#)

[**Safeguarding Children & Young People from Sexual Exploitation, DCSF \(2009\)**](#)

[**Child Sexual Exploitation Tool: Community Care Online**](#)

[**Barnardo's - Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation**](#)