

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Professionals in school settings

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This briefing paper is for all professionals working in schools. It brings together key messages from research on child sexual exploitation (CSE) with implications for practice and the allocation of school budgets. It should be read in conjunction with guidance for professionals. [[Links to English guidance](#) and [Welsh guidance](#)]

Key messages

- Child sexual exploitation can happen to young people from all backgrounds. Whilst young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited.
- Some young people may be more vulnerable – those who have experienced prior abuse, are homeless, are misusing alcohol and drugs, have a disability, are in care, are out of education, have run away/ gone missing from home or care, or are gang-associated.
- All schools (including alternative educational settings such as Pupil Referral Units and Short Stay Schools, colleges and post-16 training) should assume that CSE is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- An educational environment where there is a ‘whole-school’ approach to addressing gender inequality, sexual consent, and relationships built on respect should be developed.
- All schools are ideally placed to deliver information to students about CSE through preventative education that delivers knowledge and challenges attitudes.
- Staff within the school community should be trained to spot potential ‘warning signs’ of CSE and to feel confident to begin conversations based on their concerns.
- Multi-agency links mean that schools can be part of developing a protective community network which holds perpetrators to account.

Child Sexual Exploitation

‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse 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 (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.’

([New England definition 2017](#))

There is no one way that CSE is perpetrated (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Berelowitz et al. 2012; Gohir, 2013; Research in Practice and University of Greenwich, 2015). Grooming is common in some forms of CSE, but it is not always present (Beckett, 2011; Melrose, 2013). Online and offline exploitation can overlap (Fox and Kalkan, 2016). That children and young people may appear to co-operate cannot be taken as consent: they are legally minors and subject to many forms of coercion and control. These abuses of power are similar to those which are recognised in domestic violence and they may lead to children and young people being unable to recognise what is happening to them as abuse.

Whilst all of the research evidence to date shows that girls and young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited. The average age at which concerns are first identified is at 12 to 15 years, although recent studies show increasing rates of referrals for 8 to 11 year olds, particularly in relation to online exploitation (Department for Education, 2017). Less is known about the exploitation of those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities (Ward and Patel, 2006; Gohir, 2013; Coy, 2016a; Sharp, 2013; Fox, 2016).

There is no 'typical' victim. That said, some young people may be more vulnerable than others, and a range of indicators have been highlighted to which professionals should be alert. These include: prior abuse in the family; deprivation; homelessness; misuse of substances; disability; being in care; running away/going missing; gang-association (Beckett et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2016; Coy, 2009; Franklin, Raws and Smeaton, 2015; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Klatt et al. 2014; Jago et al. 2011; Smeaton, 2013a). It is not known whether these also apply to young people where exploitation begins or wholly occurs online, although some factors appear to be involved in both contexts (Whittle et al. 2013). It is important to remember that indicators are not evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. All they suggest is that practitioners need to use their professional curiosity and judgement to explore what is going on with each young person.

A 'whole school' approach

Creating an educational environment in which there is a 'whole-school' approach to addressing gender inequality, sexual consent, and relationships built on respect is crucial in responding to violence and abuse, including CSE (Womankind, 2010; Coy et al. 2013). The curriculum, school policies, pastoral support and school ethos all contribute to environments that enable or challenge exploitative practices and the attitudes that condone them (Chakravorty, 2016).

Preventing CSE through the curriculum

Work to prevent CSE should be taking place in independent and maintained schools, as well as state-funded schools, free schools and academies (where appropriate) and alternative educational settings, including Pupil Referral Units, Short Stay Schools, colleges and post-16 training, including from independent providers.

Schools are ideally placed to deliver information to students about CSE and a number of resources exist for them to use in doing so. It is important that this work also challenges attitudes and helps students to develop emotional and social skills (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2011; PSHE Association, 2016). Opportunities to learn about sexual exploitation should be available in age appropriate forms in both primary and secondary schools. Open conversations inside and outside the classroom can help children recognise potentially abusive behaviours, identify trusted adults who they can talk to and offer information about support services (Pearce, 2009).

“They should show videos in school. I learnt nothing about grooming - this stuff isn't common sense”¹

Classes such as Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE) including Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) as well as Citizenship offer a space to discuss sexual exploitation. Whilst the evidence base on effective prevention work specific to CSE is currently thin (for an overview see [Bovarnick and Scott, 2017](#)), key principles on prevention have been established (PSHE Association, 2016). What we know from wider prevention work on violence against women and girls should therefore inform the content of these sessions (see for example, End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2011).

¹ Girl, 15 in Franklin et al. (2015)

SRE should cover sexual consent, relationships, gender norms and sexuality, including the sexualisation of young women's bodies and standards of masculinity - what it means to be a boy or young man (Brayley et al. 2014; Coy, 2008, 2009, 2016b; Coy et al. 2013; Gohir, 2013; Marshall, 2014). Given the widespread prevalence of sexting and young people's access to online pornography, opportunities need to be provided to discuss representations of sex and how these are gendered (Coy et al. 2013; Stanley et al. 2016).

Young people are far less likely to retain information from a one-off session, so messages should be reinforced (Skidmore, 2007; Coy, 2016b). Whilst curriculum time for PSHEE and SRE lessons is vital to provide a coherent developmental programme, learning can also be enhanced by integrating CSE within the broader curriculum such as within discussions of digital/technological safety during computing lessons (Wurtele and Kenny, 2016). Addressing virtual forms of abuse and exploitation reflects young people's realities, recognising how they socialise and communicate (Beckett et al. 2013; Smeaton 2013b).

Young people with learning difficulties and disabilities will benefit from tailored information on risks, safety strategies and skill-building in real-life contexts (Barnardos, 2012; Chakravorty, 2016). This is important since having a physical or learning difficulty and/or disability increases the likelihood of being targeted by exploiters (Berelowitz et al. 2012; Cockbain et al. 2014; Jago et al. 2011; Smeaton, 2013a).

The credibility and delivery style of facilitators also appears to be significant (Beckett et al. 2013; Coy, 2016b), which suggests that specialist in-service training for teachers may be crucial. Schools may also want to consider delivering prevention sessions in partnership with local specialist services. Some young people may prefer that this work is undertaken by someone independent of the school, who they feel more able to discuss issues and ask questions of (McNeish and Scott 2015). Such an approach can be sustainable if it offers an opportunity to cascade specialist knowledge to teachers.

A safe and secure learning environment

A prevention curriculum should be combined with a safe and secure school environment which promotes positive and respectful relationships between peers, between students and staff, and includes wider parent/carer engagement (Beckett et al. 2013).

Whilst the school environment can represent a positive space for young people, it may also be a context within which they experience sexual exploitation (Berelowitz et al. 2015; Firmin, 2013). Sexual exploitation can also involve peers in complex ways, as facilitators, abusers or bystanders (Firmin, 2011; Beckett et al. 2013). Grooming and sexual exploitation may take place during the school day, including by gang-associated peers (Factor and Pitts, 2015; Gilligan, 2016). Some students may introduce other young people to exploiters (Berelowitz et al. 2012; Casey, 2015; Gohir, 2013). Social media may facilitate the spreading of gossip and images around peer groups so that the impact of CSE taking place outside of school may 'migrate' back into it (UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 2016).

Every school community should assume that CSE is an issue. In addition to educating young people about CSE, schools need to identify and support young people who are affected. Links should be made with relevant school policies, including those on bullying, sexual violence and harassment and equalities. Young people may not think of themselves as victims and may

believe that they are in love (Pearce, 2009). A proactive approach should therefore be taken to identifying victims, distinguishing between disruptive behaviour and early warning signs of exploitation.

“Recognise that it is very hard for us to see ourselves as victims and therefore to have any insight into what help we need. When we are displaying difficult and challenging behaviour, we want professionals from all agencies to have a greater awareness of this, especially schools. Don’t just exclude us for not wearing the right uniform – help us if we are being bullied. We also want schools to know how to work better with parents especially when you are being bullied or having trouble making friends”²

School staff may be alerted to CSE through young people becoming isolated from family and/or peer networks; being picked up outside schools by cars and taxis and being given presents and mobile phones (Barnardo’s, 2012; Casey, 2015). Other indicators of exploitation in girls and young women might include a more sexualised presentation of self, such as clothing, hair and makeup (Coy, 2016a).

Professionals in the school community are well placed to identify concerns early, since they observe students’ behaviour on a daily basis and may notice changes. In addition to teaching staff, these include: school nurses; learning mentors; family support workers and other support staff such as caterers. Joint training across the school community can help develop a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities, and more effective working practices to identify and intervene in sexual exploitation.

Offering support

There are particular links between CSE and education that it is important for professionals to be aware of. These include:

- truancy/being reported missing from school;
- permanent/temporary school exclusion; and
- low educational achievement (Casey, 2015; Coy, 2009; Kramer and Berg, 2003; Scott and Skidmore, 2006).

Young people who are out of school/education can quickly feel outside of the social mainstream and are thus more likely to be targeted by exploitative adults and peers (Nelson, 2016). On the other hand, being connected to a settled education community is protective (Kaestle, 2012) since it enables a sense of belonging and stability, and affirms self-belief.

Many sexually exploited young people talk of losing hope for the future, believing they are worthless and unable to imagine a way out (Beckett et al. 2013; Coy, 2008; Gilligan, 2016). Support to engage in education can change this in a number of ways: making new friends who are not involved in exploitative networks; (re)discovering intellectual and creative skills; realising it is possible to have dreams and that a different future is possible. Education can also counter the disruptive impact of involvement in criminal proceedings where young people give evidence against exploiters and abusers (Beckett and Warrington, 2015).

² Messages from children to professionals in Myers and Carmi, 2016

Offering briefings for parents/carers on CSE at schools can enable them to begin discussions with their children outside of school (Topping and Barron, 2009). Sharing concerns about individual young people and ensuring that parents have support is also a way to engage with parents/carers (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014). At the same time, it is crucial to establish whether it is safe to include parents. Care should be taken in doing this though since some parents may be involved in the exploitation or abuse (Itzin, 2001). Some sexually exploited young people may also be simultaneously navigating family and community contexts where disclosure of abuse could lead them to be at risk of other forms of harm, including forced marriage and 'honour' based violence (Sharp-Jeffs, 2016). In such circumstances, schools can offer a safe space to undertake work with young people without parental knowledge (Sharp-Jeffs, 2016).

Multiagency working

Schools may hesitate to involve external partners in responses to CSE through fear of a risk to reputation (Coy, 2016b; Gohir, 2013; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2014). Yet it is crucial for them to make multi-agency links in order to be part of developing a protective community network (Nelson, 2016; Firmin, 2016).

The designated safeguarding lead and other key members of staff such as school nurses will often be an important part of multiagency networks (Nelson, 2016; Firmin, 2016). Communication with other agencies provides schools with important strategic knowledge, including an understanding of the local context (Bovarnick and Scott, 2016). For instance, local 'hotspots' for CSE may be identified and relevant intelligence shared with schools and other agencies to raise awareness and target interventions (Berelowitz et al. 2015). School staff may then be better positioned to recognise the significance of information that they hear.

There is a tendency in responses to CSE to focus only on the victim, stigmatising them further and making perpetrators invisible (Gohir, 2013). Multi-agency working means that schools can also contribute to disrupting perpetrators - the majority of whom are boys and men. This can be achieved through feeding intelligence into the development of regional 'problem profiles' produced by police analysts (Berelowitz et al. 2013). Intelligence may include: names - including nicknames, addresses, 'hot spots', mobile numbers, car registrations and information about the role played by local businesses (Hughes and Thomas, 2016; Drew, 2016; Myers and Carmi, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Pona, 2016).

As well as contributing to local strategic responses to CSE through prevention and protection, schools can link young people into support services (Berelowitz et al. 2015). PSHEE and SRE lessons can signpost support services and equip students with strategies to identify support for themselves or their peers. Making sexual health, counselling and specialist CSE services available within school is another approach and means that young people are able to access support which might otherwise be unavailable outside of school hours (Allnock et al. 2015). Links should also be forged with other relevant support services including Violence Against Women and Girls organisations, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, substance misuse and local authority/police/voluntary led services for missing children.

Given the links between CSE and going missing, schools should have the capacity to provide data to local authorities on children who are missing from education, children absent without authorisation as well as children who regularly register for a day but do not attend lessons. This can be cross referenced with local authority data on children who are reported as missing to the

police in order to identify children who may require intervention (All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2016; Gohir, 2013).

It is clear that schools make an important contribution to protecting children and young people when they are fully engaged with and dedicate resources to tackling CSE (Casey, 2015 Coy, 2009; Kramer and Berg, 2003; Scott and Skidmore 2006).

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

- Police
- Strategic commissioning of police services
- Social workers
- Strategic commissioning of children's services
- Staff working in health settings
- Commissioning health care services
- Multi-agency working

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