

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Social workers

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This briefing paper is for social workers. It brings together key messages from research on child sexual exploitation (CSE) with implications for practice and 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/go missing from home or care or are gang-associated.
- Anxiety, shame and guilt are powerful barriers to young people seeking help.
- If exploited young people are also involved in criminal activity they may be seen only as offenders rather than as victims of exploitation.
- Support needs to be intensive and relationship-based if it is to act as a counterbalance to the ‘pull’ of exploiters.
- Encouraging young people to talk is critical – social workers need to use ‘professional curiosity’, finding respectful ways to ask difficult questions.
- Re-engaging with education, friends not linked to exploitation, and family can help young people reconnect with essential ‘social anchors’.
- Intelligence sharing with police (including nicknames, addresses, ‘hot spots’, mobile numbers, taxi firms, car registrations etc.) can contribute to local disruption efforts.

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 (CEOP, 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.

All the research evidence to date shows that girls and young women are the great majority of victims although boys and young men are also sexually 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. 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, 2015; 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 and 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, 2013). 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). The majority of offenders are men, whilst a minority are women. Sexual exploitation can also involve peers in complex ways, as facilitators, abusers or bystanders (Firmin, 2011; Beckett et al. 2013).

Indicators are not evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. All they tell you is that you need to use your professional curiosity and judgement to explore what is going on for each young person. Information sharing between agencies is a first step; the next has to be sensitive but inquisitive conversations with young people.

Social workers should assume that CSE is a national issue, happening in your local area, and take a proactive approach to identifying victims.

An invitation to tell

Young people who have been sexually exploited may have experienced multiple abuses and breaches of trust, making it exceedingly difficult to speak about what is happening. The power afforded to statutory social workers can sometimes create a further layer of distrust, as young people may fear the consequences of disclosure for themselves, siblings and family members (Firmin, 2011; Beckett et al. 2013). This may also be linked to preconceptions about social workers or negative past experiences of professional intervention. In addition, they may fear reprisal by their abusers or be dependent on them for affection, protection or drugs (Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Gilligan, 2016; Hughes and Thomas, 2016). Fear of being disbelieved or blamed, and feelings of anxiety and shame, can be powerful barriers to disclosure. Reassuring young people that they will be believed, and that exploitation is never their fault, are important messages to communicate: they are part of offering an invitation to tell.

Encouraging young people to talk openly is critical. Professional curiosity is vital: asking questions respectfully about possible signs of sexual exploitation e.g. sexual transmitted infections and pregnancy, gifts and unexplained money, running away/going missing from home or education, becoming isolated from family and/or peer networks (see for example, Barnardo's, 2012). If exploited young people are also involved in criminal behaviour they may be seen only as offenders rather than victims of exploitation (Firmin, 2011; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015). Taking time to exercise professional curiosity and asking more searching questions can get underneath the immediate offence, possibly revealing that the young person is also being abused. This may be especially pertinent in cases where a young person appears to facilitate the exploitation of a peer (Beckett, 2011; Ghani, 2016). Having the confidence to ask questions about whether images of young people might have been produced is another important invitation to tell (Martin, 2016). There are specific anxieties associated with sexual images e.g. that they may circulate online indefinitely, which need to be addressed.

Finally, building trust that enables young people to talk rests on being clear about the limits of confidentiality. Where information has to be shared, young people should know who will be told and what might happen next. Being honest about potential actions is the foundation for a relationship built on respect.

Relationship-based practice

“Just because I didn’t act as if I was vulnerable didn’t mean I wasn’t”¹

CSE involves emotional, psychological, sexual and often physical abuse. The impacts of this can mean that young people appear as uncooperative or even aggressive and unwilling to engage with carers and professionals (Coy, 2009; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Hickle, 2016; Leon and Raws, 2016; Pearce, 2009). It is critical to create a relationship so that young people feel cared about and trust can begin to be built (Bartlett, 2016; Coy, 2009, 2016; Firmin, 2016; Sidebotham et al. 2016; Shuker, 2013). Social workers have a crucial role in developing these relationships, alongside carers and other support workers.

Respecting young people’s capacity to make decisions about their lives can be fraught where they are experiencing harm. Some may not view a perpetrator’s actions as abusive or controlling, perhaps believing they are in love (Pearce, 2009). This does not make sexual exploitation any less abusive, but it does require a careful approach from professionals. If young people believe that they are loved and valued by those who are exploiting them, it can be very destabilising and unwelcome to hear that they are being abused.

Taking the time to explore ideas about relationships, gender norms and sexuality – the sexualisation of young women’s bodies and standards of masculinity (what it means to be a boy or young man) – is crucial for both young women and young men (Coy, 2008; 2016a; Brayley et al. 2014). If young people perceive that professionals only make contact following a report about sexual activity or abuse, this can reinforce a sense that their only worth is sexual (Coy, 2008). More generally, social workers need to be mindful not to inadvertently reproduce abusive dynamics by making young people feel disempowered or that situations are out of their control (Warrington, 2016). Enabling young people to participate in decisions that are taken about their lives is crucial to protection, as it can hold them in relationships of professional support (Warrington, 2016).

Relationship-based work on sexual exploitation has a high emotional toll, so finding support, space to reflect and regular supervision is important.

Working with other services

Sexual exploitation is often a process, and enabling young people to find a way out can be similar to supporting victims of domestic violence: focussing on strengths; assessing risk and widening space for action – a process that has been called ‘sustained safeguarding’ (Pearce, 2009). Support needs to be intensive to provide young people with the sense of relational security they need, to act as a counterbalance to the ‘pull’ of exploiters (Coy, 2009; Gilligan, 2016; Shuker, 2013). This includes proactive outreach work, including daily phone calls and text messages, door-stepping and other ways of maintaining contact, even where this support is initially, or repeatedly, rejected (Oxford Brookes University, 2015; Warrington, 2013).

Specialist sexual exploitation services – in the statutory and voluntary sectors - are often able to be more flexible and work with young people for as long as necessary (Coy, 2016a; Gilligan, 2016).

¹ Young woman, cited in Brown 2006

“You feel more open with them. They are more open with you; like a friend ... They don’t judge you. ... They help you to become a better person. They don’t say ‘listen you’re like this you’re like that’. They help you and they’ll do anything for you to get you out of trouble”²

Proactively connecting children and young people to specialist support services is crucial (Beckett et al. 2015; Cossar et al, 2013) as they can act as a bridge to engaging with social workers (Coy, 2016a), breaking down fear and distrust to ‘unlock’ positive outcomes (Shuker, 2013). Local work on Violence Against Women and Girls and specialist organisations will be useful links, as will partnerships with other services to address young people’s specific needs e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), substance misuse services.

Enabling young people to connect with education and social activities is also important. Many sexually exploited young people talk of losing hope for the future, believing they are worthless and unable to imagine a way out (Coy, 2008; Gilligan, 2016). Support to engage in education, training, employment and new social activities offers young people an opportunity to meet new friends who are not involved in exploitative networks, identify their intellectual and creative skills, and signals that it is possible to have dreams and a different future. This can also mitigate the transition beyond 18 so that young people have developed ongoing support networks.

Involving parents and foster carers

Helping parents to maintain a relationship with their child can also help ‘pull’ a young person back from the exploiter (D’Arcy et al, 2015; Gibbons, 2014). Professionals may mistakenly assume that parents are unwilling or unable to protect their child from exploitation when what they need is support and advice in order to do so (Smeaton, 2013). Yet families/carers can be crucial in building and maintaining protective networks (Hallett, 2015).

At the same time, it is crucial to establish whether it is safe to include parents. They may be involved in the exploitation or abuse (Itzin, 2001). Some sexually exploited young people may 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).

While it may, on occasion, be appropriate to take children into care, separation from family and friends risks isolating young people from protective relationships and support. Local placements with foster carers trained in supporting sexually exploited young people, where available, can be a positive option (Shuker, 2013).

Sexual exploitation and young people in care

Links between being ‘looked after’ and sexual exploitation are well recognised but they are less well understood (Beckett, 2011; Coy, 2009; Shuker, 2013). While issues that lead young people into local authority care may put them at risk, the experience of care itself can also be significant, not least because of the multiple transitions involved in placement changes.

² Young woman, cited in Gilligan, 2016

Social workers and care providers need to consider how to mitigate:

- inadequacies in the care provided e.g. absence of relationship-based practice, neglect of young people's welfare (Coy, 2008; 2009; Hallett, 2015);
- the emotional instability created by multiple placement moves and changes of social worker (Coy, 2008; 2009);
- associating with peers also at high risk (Coy, 2008; 2009; Beckett, 2013);
- perpetrators targeting young people who are less likely to have robust support networks, whom they have a higher chance of isolating and controlling (Smeaton, 2013).

Young people who have been trafficked across international borders for the purposes of sexual exploitation may also be placed in local authority care (Pearce et al. 2009). Here, action to protect from harm should override concern about age or immigration status (Pearce et al. 2009). Young people may also be moved around different locations within the UK through internal trafficking (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014). [Guidance](#) on how to respond to trafficking may be relevant.

Sexual exploitation does not stop at age 18 (Coy, 2016b), and the transition to adult services can mean young people fall through gaps. Social workers can ensure that all young people are in contact with appropriate local support services, including through any relevant approaches to adult safeguarding.

Early intervention, prevention and disruption

Working closely with specialist services and families provides more opportunities to disrupt sexual exploitation in the early stages (Research in Practice and University of Greenwich, 2015). Part of social workers' engagement with parents and carers can be highlighting indicators of sexual exploitation and providing information on what support is available for young people locally. Specialist CSE services can explore safeguarding concerns with other local professionals (Harris et al, 2015).

Prevention and disruption of sexual exploitation also needs to focus on perpetrators. It is important for social workers to be part of local multi-agency forums on sexual exploitation. Intelligence (including nicknames, addresses, 'hot spots', mobile numbers, taxi firms, car registrations etc.) can be shared so that police can target individuals, locations and venues. Liaising with local authority partners such as park wardens, street cleaners, licensing and health and safety can also be effective in disrupting perpetrators (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; D'Arcy and Thomas, 2016). The intent here is to invite such people to be local 'eyes and ears', to become part of developing a protective community network (Nelson, 2016; Firmin, 2016).

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Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

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

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