
Handout - Child Sexual Exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can involve physical contact but it also includes non-contact activities, eg the production of sexual images using children, forcing children to look at or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse.

Remember, as with all abuse this applies to any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years, including 16 and 17 year olds who can legally consent to have sex. It can still be abuse even if the sexual activity appears consensual. It can take place in person or via technology, or a combination of both. It can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and may, or may not, be accompanied by violence or threats of violence.

It may happen without the child or young person's immediate knowledge, for example others copying videos or images they have created and posting on social media. It can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and children or adults.

It can be a one-off occurrence or a series of incidents over time, and range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse.

One key element is often that there is some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse. We often think of age, where the perpetrator is much older, but the imbalance can also be because of gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, or financial resources. As is the case with many forms of abuse, indicators can be mistaken for normal teenage behaviours so we have to develop a professional nose and curiosity around such behaviours. Even when teenagers are old enough to consent, unless they had complete freedom of choice, and the ability to make that choice, it is not consensual.

In most cases of child sexual exploitation there is some form of exchange. Sexual activity in return for something, with a clear victim and perpetrator. Sometimes children can become perpetrators of sexual abuse of other children as part of their sexual exploitation. They may be forced to introduce other children to their abuser otherwise the abuser will harm their family for example. Also remember, it is never the victim's fault even if they 'appear' to have chosen to do it.

The government definition of Child Sexual exploitation is:

"Child sexual exploitation is a form 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 (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. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology."

Sexual exploitation can occur with any child in any community. Children 12-15 years, of all ethnicities, are most at risk but children as young as 8 years have been victims. Females are most frequently observed but boys are also at risk, and are less likely to disclose CSE or show indicators of abuse. As with other forms of abuse there are heightened vulnerability factors. Many victims of CSE have often be subject to other forms of abuse as well.

Indicators of CSE

Potential indicators of CSE include:

- in possession of money, clothes, mobile phones etc without a plausible explanation
- gang association
- isolation from peers
- exclusion or unexplained absences
- leaving home/care without explanation and persistently going missing or returning late
- excessive phone calls or texting

- coming home having used drugs or alcohol
- inappropriate sexualised behaviour for their age
- sexually transmitted infections
- signs of physical or sexual assault
- relationships with controlling or significantly older people
- hanging around areas known for sex work
- high amount of internet use and/or social media
- being very secretive
- self-harming or changes in eating habits
- or no visible indicators.

Examples of CSE

The following examples of CSE are taken directly from Government guidance:

- A 44 year old female posing as a 17 year old female online and persuading a 12 year old male to send her a sexual image, and then threatening to tell his parents if he doesn't continue to send more explicit images.
- A 14 year old male giving a 17 year old male oral sex because the older male has threatened to tell his parents he is gay if he refuses.
- A 14 year old female having sex with a 16 year old gang member and his two friends in return for the protection of the gang.
- A 13 year old female offering and giving an adult male taxi driver sexual intercourse in return for a taxi fare home.
- A 21 year old male persuading his 17 year old 'girlfriend' to have sex with his friends to pay off a drug debt.
- A mother letting other adults abuse her 8 year old child in return for money.
- A group of men bringing two 17 year old females to a hotel in another town and charging others to have sex with them.
- Three 15 year old females being taken to a house party and given 'free' alcohol and drugs, then made to have sex with six adult males to pay for this.

How to respond

- Never blame the victim.
- Share information as soon as possible to enable effective support to be provided.
- Remember, safeguarding of children is everyone's responsibility.
- Always follow normal safeguarding regulations.

All responses should be:

- child centred
- involve the child's family and carers wherever safe and appropriate
- be responsive and pro-active
- develop positive trusting relationships
- understand the complexities involved and ensure that language or actions do not make the victim feel they are somehow to blame.

Remember

A child choosing to continue contact with the perpetrator does not mean all is ok. We can believe that if it was harmful the child would stop it. CSE is very complex and there are power dynamics at play. If you suspect, then report, do not wait for confirmation or disclosure from the victim.

Further information

- *Child sexual exploitation Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation*, Department for Education, February 2017

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591903/CSE_Guidance_Core_Document_13.02.2017.pdf

- Child Sexual Exploitation and Online Protection command <https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>