

Child sexual exploitation

Headlines

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is child abuse. It involves children and young people being forced or manipulated into sexual activity in exchange for something, such as money, gifts, or affection and status.

It is unclear how many people are affected by CSE nationally or locally. Nationally there were 2,409 confirmed victims of CSE in either gangs or groups during the 14-month period from August 2010 to October 2011, although this is thought to be a substantial undercounting.

In the year to March 2011 at least 16,500 children nationally displayed three or more signs or behaviour indicating they were at risk of child sexual exploitation.

Why is this issue important?

Nationally, regionally and locally there is risk to children and young people of child sexual exploitation (CSE). CSE is child abuse. It involves children and young people being forced or manipulated into sexual activity in exchange for something, such as money, gifts or affection and status. The sexual exploitation of children and young people 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.”

Abuse of any child is intolerable. CSE is an area of abuse that could be overlooked because of the perception of the relationship between the child and the perpetrator(s). Although the predominant evidence is of men sexually abusing children and young people,

both men and women have been known to sexually exploit young men and women. There is a presumption that children and young people are sexually exploited by people they do not know. However, evidence shows that they are often abused by “boyfriends” or people with whom they feel they have a relationship¹.

Child sexual exploitation can take many forms from the seemingly “consensual” relationship where sex is exchanged for attention, affection, accommodation or gifts, to serious organised crime and child trafficking. What marks out exploitation is an imbalance of power within the relationship. The perpetrator always holds some kind of power over the victim, increasing the dependence of the victim as the exploitative relationship develops¹.

Child sexual exploitation is known to occur in two settings: in gangs and groups. Gangs mainly comprise men and boys aged 13-25 years old, who take part in many forms of criminal activity, such as knife crime or robbery. Children can be sexually exploited by a gang, but this is not the reason why a gang is formed². By contrast, child sexual exploitation by a group involves people who come together in person or online for the purpose of setting up, co-ordinating and/or taking part in the sexual exploitation of children in either an organised or opportunistic way². Locally we do not know how much each of these settings are active.

Sexual exploitation can have a serious impact on the life of children and young people. It can lead to difficulties in forming relationships with others, a lack of confidence or self-esteem and can affect their mental and physical health. Sexual exploitation can put the young person at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections including HIV, unwanted pregnancy and abortion, as well as long-term sexual and reproductive health problems. It can also ultimately impact on their parenting capacity in the future¹.

It is unclear how many people are affected by CSE; the OCC (Office of the Children’s Commissioner) reported that nationally there were 2,409 confirmed victims of CSE in either gangs or groups during the 14-month period from August 2010 to October 2011. It is important to note that the Inquiry concluded that the 2,409 reported victims are likely to be a substantial undercounting. The OCC also reported that from April 2010 to March 2011 at least 16,500 children displayed three or more signs or behaviour indicating they were at risk of child sexual exploitation. These are listed in the significant factors section. Assuming children in Kirklees are as likely to display these signs at least 140 children are at risk locally.

What significant factors are affecting this issue?

A lack of awareness and understanding of this issue has previously allowed CSE to go unrecognised and unreported or not responded to effectively.

Signs of risk and vulnerability

The following are typical vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse²:

- Living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance use, domestic violence, parental [mental health](#) issues and 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.
- 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.
- Homelessness.
- Lacking friends from the same age group.
- Living in residential care.
- Low self-esteem or self-confidence.
- Young carers.

Technology forms part of most people's lives, especially those of young people. As a result it has been rare to identify cases of child sexual exploitation where the use of technology has not been a factor. This fact is significant, as information technology is having a direct impact in a multitude of ways on the means by which people are able to sexually exploit children²

Which groups are most affected by this issue?

Any child or young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation, regardless of their family background or other circumstances. This includes boys and young men as well as girls and young women. However, some groups are particularly vulnerable. These include children and young people who have a history of running away or of going missing from home, those with special needs, those in and leaving residential and foster care, migrant children, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, children who have disengaged from education, children who are abusing drugs and alcohol, and those involved in gangs¹.

Girls and young women are at much greater risk than boys and young men and are targeted due to the way some men and boys perceive women and girls. Victims come from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The OCC found that there was a higher rate of victimisation amongst black and minority ethnic children and young people than has been previously identified, with 28% of victims reported to the Inquiry from black and ethnic minority backgrounds².

Where is this causing greatest concern?

- Professionals require training to recognise sexual exploitation risk factors and how to respond.
- There needs to be an agreed response from all agencies to CSE.
- A multi agency co-ordinated response to identify and intervene early.
- Young people need to be made aware of sexual exploitation and enabled to recognise risky behaviours³.
- Parents/carers and voluntary and community and faith groups need to have an understanding of CSE and information on what to do.
- Introduce a system to monitor the numbers at risk of child sexual exploitation.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

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- Parents/carers and voluntary and community and faith groups need to have an understanding of CSE and information on what to do.
- Introduce a system to monitor the numbers at risk of child sexual exploitation.

References

1. Department for Children, Schools and Families. Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary Guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children London: HMSO; 2009. Available from: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00689-2009>
2. "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 and Groups Interim report; November 2012. Available from: http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_636
3. Child-line. Caught in a Trap – Grooming in 2012. Available from: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/our-news/nspcc-news/12-11-12-grooming-report/caught-in-a-trap-pdf_wdf92793.pdf

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