

Child Sexual Exploitation Training Handout

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an act that involves a child under 16 years of age in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person, whether or not it is claimed that the child either consented or assented. Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.

Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including penetrative or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, indecent images, or in watching sexual activities, using sexual language towards a child, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways. Children who experience sexual abuse may experience multiple forms of abuse and neglect within and beyond the family.

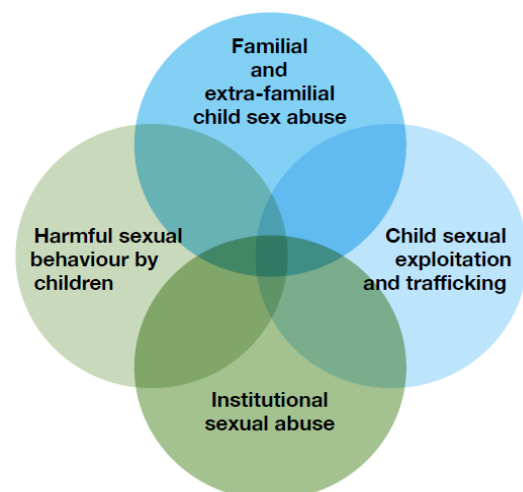
What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse in which a person or persons of any age take advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity, in return for something received by the child and/or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse. As with other forms of child sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not excuse or mitigate the abusive nature of the act. Boys as well as girls may be victims. Although CSE is not a specific criminal offence in itself, there is a range of criminal and civil options that can be used to disrupt and prosecute this form of abuse.

Age of Consent

In the protection of children from exploitation, 'child' means child or young person up to age 18. For or those who may be victims of sexual offences aged 16-17 and who are at risk of significant harm, child protection procedures should be considered, and must be applied when there is concern about sexual exploitation or trafficking.

Overlapping categories of sexual abuse are represented in the diagram on the right. All require a child protection response. A child may experience multiple forms of maltreatment from different persons. Exposure to other forms of harm, such as domestic abuse or parental alcohol and drug use, may increase vulnerability to sexual abuse. 'Disclosure' is not a prerequisite for a child protection investigation.



Understanding Child Sexual Exploitation

Exchange is the distinguishing factor in the various forms of CSE. The nature of the exchange may be material and emotional, including, food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, gifts, affection, or a sense of belonging. In some situations the abuser or facilitator may also achieve financial gain or status. Alcohol or drugs may be given to the child. Exchange may take the form of compliance with sexual activity in order to avert a threat of harm to the child or to someone close to them. Children who have shared images of themselves may experience threats unless they comply with an abuser's demands. Perpetrators manipulate and apply coercive control.

In all forms of CSE there is an imbalance of power. This may relate to the abuser's age, gender, intellect, physical strength or other resources. Grooming may draw a child or children in to abusive processes or events. Grooming means targeting, befriending and establishing an emotional link with a child in order to manipulate, exploit, traffic or otherwise abuse them. Grooming can take place over a short or long period of time – from weeks to years. Violence and intimidation may form part of the coercion. Grooming can involve forming relationships with a child's family or friends and manipulating their trust or reliance in order to abuse a child.

CSE may be perpetrated by:

- family members, including being sold for sex
- older adults
- peer networks, within which abuse of power occurs
- gangs
- criminal networks

The conditions for harm from CSE are a product of an interaction of factors, including:

- The source of harm (perpetrators and/or associated place/context)
- A child's vulnerabilities (due to both internal and external factors)
- The limitations of protective systems

Safeguarding efforts must be collaborative, multi-agency and proactive. 'Disclosure' is not necessary in order to engage in this way to reduce risk. The incentives for young people not to tell can include a mixture of fear, peer pressure, loss of material reward and recognition, emotional need and manipulation of relationship. They may be affected by other forms of abuse and neglect. Each individual will have their own experience of 'choice'.

A child may be drawn in to CSE in search of some form of affection, relationship or belonging. The child may or may not understand this as abuse. This does not equate to choice and consent, even for a 16- or 17-year-old who might legally consent to sex.

CSE and Child Criminal Exploitation

CSE may be associated with child criminal exploitation (CCE). CCE is not defined in law but is a term that has come to be associated with 'county lines'. County lines is a term used in the UK to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas (within the UK), using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

Child criminal exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into any criminal activity, in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator, or through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited, even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact – it can also occur through the use of technology. The criminal exploitation of children is not confined to county lines but can also include other forms of criminal activity such as theft, acquisitive crime, knife crimes and other forms of criminality. CCE requires a child protection response.

CSE and Digital Technology

Sexual exploitation can occur through digital technology, in direct contact, or through a combination of both. Its occurrence often goes unrecognised and victims can feel isolated in plain sight. CSE of teenagers is more common than victimisation of young children.

Digital technologies are often a vector for:

- grooming online for sexual abuse offline
- children viewing abusive images of children
- selling children online for abuse offline
- making abusive images of children
- sharing and viewing abusive images of children
- access to chat lines via the internet, social media, and online gaming platforms or mobile phones
- sharing of intimate images

[Link to Resources for Online Safety](#)

A multi-agency approach is needed in appreciating children's evolving use of technology and the relevance to forms of CSE. Parents, schools and specialist services all have a preventative role to play in helping raise awareness of risky digital behaviours, especially communicating about sexuality with adults. Girls (13–17 years) tend to be at higher risk for online sexual exploitation (than younger children or boys) and those experiencing other forms of conflict, distress or abuse offline tend to be more vulnerable online. Very few online perpetrators are complete strangers. Grooming may be gradual. Some victims feel they are in a special relationship with the abuser.

Childrens Rights

Children’s right to protection from all forms of abuse applies whatever the context.

A rights-based approach to protection and recovery from sexual exploitation is fundamentally supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); and specifically Articles 19, 34, 35, 36 and 39.

As reflected in Article 12 of UNCRC, The Promise (Independent Care Review 2020) also expects that children should be “...meaningfully and appropriately involved” in all protective planning and decision making.

Children and young people’s involvement in strategic and service development is key to rights-based and effective service development.

Recognition and Response

CSE is often hidden. As with other forms of sexual abuse, the process of disclosure is rarely a discrete event, and patterns of disclosure and retraction are common. It may take many years, or may never happen. Fear, anticipation of stigma, reprisal, loss and shame that might follow disclosure intersect differently for each child. They are among the most common barriers to early recognition and help, alongside feelings of entrapment and helplessness. Shame and fear may be more pronounced within some cultural groups.

Boys who have been abused often struggle to share their experience throughout life. Both containment and disclosure can be profoundly disturbing for the child and others closely affected. A trauma-informed approach to assessment and support is essential at all stages.

Some CSE involves trafficking and criminal exploitation. This is when children are recruited, transported or exchanged in order to be exploited. Travel may include short distances (e.g. taxi rides) or medium distances (e.g. across a rural/island region or into an urban centre), as well as international travel. Assessments of possible CSE should consider if a child has been trafficked for the purposes of CSE. The immediate priority is to secure the safety and respond to the needs of the child. Not all trafficking involves CSE.

Some children and young people involved in CSE may be coerced into committing crimes by those who perpetrate CSE. This could include committing crime to escape abusers, or as a cry for help. Those who experience CSE may experience a punitive and criminalising response for engaging in antisocial behaviour, and may not be recognised as children who have been sexually exploited. It is essential that professionals engage with them, listen, and take time to understand the context of behaviour and choices with which the child has been faced. Victims of CSE require protection and support.

Further Resources on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

<https://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/spotlight/child-sexual-exploitation/>

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/safeguarding-child-sexual-exploitation>

<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk>

Possible Indicators of CSE

CSE can occur without obvious indicators, and careful assessment is needed to explore the meaning of the indicators below, which may be related to other issues.

- going missing from home or school during the day, overnight or longer
- multiple callers/visitors including unknown adults/older young people
- entering/leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults
- evidence of/suspicion of physical or sexual assault
- disclosure of assault followed by withdrawal of an allegation
- unplanned pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- peers involved in sexual exploitation
- drug/alcohol use
- isolation from peers/social networks
- exclusion or unexplained absences from school or college
- relationships with controlling adults
- unexplained money or 'gifts', including expensive clothing, new phones and other items
- frequenting areas known for adult prostitution
- children under 13 years asking for sexual health advice
- concerning use of mobile/internet/online devices (sending/receiving sexual images)
- multiple phones or SIMs, being protective of a phone, abnormally high volume of secretive calls, change in behaviour as a result of phone contacts
- depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts

Additional factors that may interact to create vulnerability

- abuse, neglect or an early adverse experience
- disrupted family life, including family breakdown and care experience
- domestic abuse
- bullying and peer pressure
- absence from education
- experience of exclusion or isolation, especially in transitional phases
- drug and alcohol use
- poverty or homelessness
- poor health and low self-esteem
- learning disabilities and autism
- living with attitudes that normalise exploitation and violence in sexual relationships
- access to adult pornography and experience of attitudes that normalise sexual violence

Exploration of same-sex relationships and questioning of sexual orientation or gender identity can also result in children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) being more vulnerable to CSE