

Spotting the signs of CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation)

There are many ways we can spot the signs that a young person may be being sexually exploited, but even when young people present numerous indicators, it does not always mean they are being exploited.

There are a number of warning signs that could suggest that a child (under 18) is being, or is at risk of being, sexually exploited. These could include:

- Frequently going missing from home or school
- Going out late at night and not returning until morning
- Being picked up in cars by unknown adults
- A significantly older boyfriend, girlfriend or friend
- Unexplained money, possessions, mobile phone credit or a new mobile phone
- Changes in behaviour, for example becoming secretive or aggressive
- Increased use of mobile phone and/or internet activity
- Involvement in criminal activity
- Regularly going out and drinking alcohol and/or taking drugs

Additional Vulnerabilities

- Feeling isolated
- Looked after children
- Being bullied
- Unstable family/friend networks
- Previously experienced abuse
- Going missing
- Homelessness/sofa-surfing
- Existing dependency
- Learning disabilities
- Difficult life experiences
- Bereavement

Children and young people at the risk of child exploitation are:

- Children and young people of any age up to 18
- Both girls and boys
- Young people from any community, regardless of religion or ethnicity
- Though any young person can be targeted, some are more vulnerable than others

Any child - male or female - could be a victim of this form of abuse, regardless of their background.

Some young people may be more vulnerable to exploitation than others; for example young people with learning disabilities, and young people who have experienced the death of someone significant in their lives.

Grooming Models

Child sexual exploitation can occur in different ways and in different situations. Many young people are 'groomed' by their abuser, which tends to conjure up the image of an adult hiding behind a computer screen talking to young people online. However this is not the only form of grooming and young people can also be targeted in person.

Grooming is an action deliberately undertaken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child, to lower the child's inhibitions with the intention to sexually abuse them. In England and Wales, sections 14 and 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, make it an offence to arrange a meeting with a child, for oneself or someone else, with the intent of conducting sexual activities. The meeting itself is also criminalised.

Grooming is a carefully planned process with the aim of controlling a young person, to ensure that they do exactly what the perpetrator wants. Initially, a young person may receive gifts and be showered with attention and affection, but this may later turn to blackmail, threats of violence or actual violence.

Perpetrators can be male or female from any background, any age group and any ethnicity. Often, perpetrators are well-liked, articulate and plausible. Sexual exploitation can also happen between young people and within peer groups.

It is not a young person's fault if they are sexually exploited. Perpetrators of child sexual exploitation often have power - real or perceived - over the young people they abuse. This power may be due to their age, their status, their intellect, or their physical strength. They use this power to manipulate and control their victim.

These are the most widely used terms for grooming models as defined by the [Barnardo's Puppet on a String report, 2011](#).

The Relationship/Peer Model

This type of grooming explains how perpetrators often befriend young people and make them believe they are in a loving 'relationship' or friendship and then coerce them to have sex with friends or associates. Peer to peer grooming can sometimes be associated with gang activity, where the young person doing the grooming is a victim themselves.

Whilst this definition is widely referred to as the 'Boyfriend Model', it's worth bearing in mind that this does not take into account the fact that boys and young men can also be sexually exploited in this way.

Organised/Network Model & Trafficking Model

This type of exploitation includes sex trafficking of young people, sometimes across the country or internationally or even just between houses or hotels, sometimes as part of an organised network of 'buying and selling' of the sexual services of young people by perpetrators. Some young people involved in the organised network may also be used themselves to recruit other young people into the network. This model usually involves numerous victims and perpetrators and is the most widely reported in the media.

Inappropriate Relationship Model

This usually involves one perpetrator who has inappropriate power or control over a young person - one indicator could be a significant age gap or a person in a position of authority exploiting a young person for sex. The young person may believe they are in a loving relationship.

Gangs Model

There is still limited understanding of gang models in child sexual exploitation. This can include sexual exploitation through gang initiation rituals, gang pressure or as punishment for crossing areas/boundaries. It is also worth considering that many gang members can also be victims themselves.