



Child Sexual Exploitation

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) where the victim is usually given something, whether food, money, drugs, alcohol or gifts, in exchange for sexual activity with the abuser. Offenders target vulnerable young people and use their power over the child to 'persuade' them. It can affect any child, anytime, anywhere – regardless of their social or ethnic background.

A common feature of CSE is that the child or young person does not recognise the coercive nature of the relationship and does not see themselves as a victim of exploitation.

This means that they are unlikely to report the abuse so others around them must be alert to the signs of CSE and report concerns to the authorities.

CSE can also occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post images on the internet or to mobile phones without immediate payment or gain.

Signs of grooming and child sexual exploitation

Knowing the signs of child sexual exploitation (CSE) can help give a voice to children. A child is unlikely to know they are being groomed or exploited and might not speak out. Any child can be groomed into exploitation, though some children may be more at risk. Children who are more vulnerable, for example children in care and children with disabilities, may be more heavily targeted by groomers who want the child to become dependent on them.

Any sudden changes in a young person's lifestyle should be discussed with them. It is important to remember that warning signs will be presented differently for each child or young person being sexually exploited. Teens might also behave in a way that could be seen as 'normal teenage behaviour', masking the sexual exploitation.

Signs that a child or young person is being groomed or sexually exploited include:

- Unhealthy or inappropriate sexual behaviour;
- Persistently going missing for periods of time or returning home late regularly;
- Frequently staying out late or overnight with no explanation as to where they have been;
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going;
- Using more than one phone;
- Spending more time online or on their devices;

- Excessive receipt of texts or phone calls, letters, or emails;
- Having an older girlfriend or boyfriend, or having relationships with controlling older individuals or groups;
- Unexplained absences from school, college, training, or work;
- Suddenly acquiring expensive gifts such as mobile phones, jewellery – even drugs – and not being able to explain how they came by them;
- Having mood swings and changes in temperament;
- Having hotel cards or keys to unknown places;
- Noticeable changes in behaviour – becoming secretive, defensive or aggressive when asked about their personal life;
- Wearing inappropriate clothing that is too adult or revealing for their age;
- Significant changes in emotional well-being;
- Sudden changes in lifestyle;
- Increasingly disruptive or violent behaviour;
- Getting into trouble with the police;
- Bruises, marks on the body, bleeding in their genital or anal area, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse or self-harm.

How does sexual exploitation affect a child?

Once a child is entrapped in a cycle of sexual exploitation, it can be difficult for their parents to understand why they return to their abusers. The best way to explain this is that the control and manipulation the child is under is very similar to that experienced by victims of domestic violence.

Repeated sexual abuse will result in fear of being blamed or not being believed, a lack of self-esteem and worthlessness, but also misplaced loyalties towards the offenders. For many children, the abuse equates to their first experience of sex and love, of which they have no prior experience to measure it against. It is also important to remember that sexually exploited children are often explicitly threatened with violence if they disclose the abuse. It is common for their family to be threatened, so the child may feel they are protecting you, the parent, by enduring the abuse.

Both sexual exploitation in person and online can have long-term effects on a child or young person. They may:

- Struggle with trust and be fearful of forming new relationships;
- Become isolated from family and friends;
- Fail exams or drop out of education;
- Become pregnant at a young age;



- Experience unemployment;
- Have mental health problems;
- Make suicide attempts;
- Abuse alcohol and drugs;
- Take part in criminal behaviour;
- Experience homelessness.

Useful Links

<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/preventing-child-sexual-exploitation>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/child-sexual-exploitation/>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/protecting-children/cse>

<https://paceuk.info/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-cse/>