
Summary

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can affect all children, regardless of gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, faith or economic background. This report (https://www.barnardos.org.uk/it_s_not_on_the_radar_report.pdf) highlights how public and professional perception often stereotype victims of CSE. It explores that while some victims and children at risk do meet this description, assumptions can affect identification of and response to other children who do not fit the stereotype. Barnardo’s organised a series of roundtable discussions pulling together experts from the field of CSE to explore how identification and response connect by focusing on Boys and Young Men, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Questioning (LGBTQ) young people, children with Disabilities and Ethnicity and Faith.

The report does not attempt to present all the available evidence on victims of sexual exploitation or diversity, however it does highlight some existing evidence and provides a summary of the discussions.

In summary the report suggests that Professionals must look beyond stereotypes and ask the right questions. Information on relationships, including education within schools, must go beyond portraying heterosexual relationships as the only type of relationship, and beyond only biological sex education. The focus should be on healthy relationships and how young people can protect themselves and identify abusive relationships, regardless of who is in the relationship. Organisations working on CSE should reach out to those that support diverse groups to share knowledge about CSE and learn how to work with different communities. Due to the lack of information about CSE and diversity, professionals must gather information on their local areas so they can gain a better understanding of the demographics of those affected by CSE locally. Professionals should be monitoring for sexuality and gender identity; meaning they should be supported with training, to ask children and young people questions about their sexuality and gender identity.

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse. It covers a wide range of situations where children are manipulated and coerced into sexual activities by a perpetrator in exchange for something.
The Department for Education, along with the NWG Network, developed the following definition:

**Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 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.**

**Perceptions and Stereotypes of Victims**

The highly publicised investigations of CSE in Rotherham, Rochdale, Peterborough, Oxford and Bristol, all appear to illustrate one particular form of sexual exploitation; a group of men, known to one another, well organised exploiting young girls. It was reported that the girls being exploited were of white British heritage and the men were of the Asian Community which has led to the media dubbing these groups as so called “Asian Grooming Gangs”. Contrary to media attention, there are multiple models of exploitation and victims are not solely white British, but are found in all communities throughout the UK. Additionally, victims may be female, male or transgender and they may be heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transsexual. Furthermore it cannot be assumed, that males who are sexually exploited by other males must be gay. Nonetheless, when dealing with individual victims, Professionals must recognise that each case is unique, and that individuals must be treated as such.

There is a very strong risk attached to stereotyping people affected by CSE, in that it can prevent the identification of victims. Professionals must remember that boys and young men may not be identified because their abuser is a female; boys who are gay may not be identified because of assumptions about what is appropriate in gay relationships; girls who are lesbian may not be identified because their abuser is seen as their ‘girlfriend’ or friend; and young people living at home may not be identified because they have a supportive family.

**Layering of Victims’ Identities**

The report highlights that victims of CSE do not necessarily sit within one particular category. For example, one person can fit into multiple ‘categories’ – being male, gay, having a developmental disability and coming from the traveller community. Each layer of their identity creates additional complexities in understanding how they came to be exploited and professionals must identify each layer and respond to it effectively by understanding how each layer of the child’s characteristics interact with one another and what type of support is required to enable recovery and meet particular needs.
Diversity of Victims

Boys and Young Men

Boys and young men affected by sexual exploitation are often a hidden group; societal attitudes frequently do not associate boys and young men with sexual violence victimisation. The roundtable found that those working with, or researching, boys and young men in relation to CSE have seen a perception that boys were either the perpetrators of abuse, or were ‘lucky’ to be having sex, regardless of the person they were having sex with. Societal attitudes linking ‘being a man’ and being masculine to having sex were thought to be widespread, meaning that boys and young men having sex with an unsuitable ‘partner’ might not be seen as potential victims. It was suggested that despite the gender-inclusive term ‘child sexual exploitation’, professionals and the public tend to associate CSE with girls only. One agency that works with offenders did not explicitly refer to boys, although the majority of those they worked with were boys.

Key Findings:

- Societal values regarding masculinity and perceptions of males as perpetrators are seen to mask the fact that boys and young men can be victims too.
- Males seem to find it particularly hard to disclose abuse. In order for males to feel they can disclose abuse, it is essential that an open dialogue is had, that the person making a complaint is listened to properly and that no assumptions are made about future offending. Often the lines are blurred, if a young man is offending the focus tends to be on the offending behaviour rather than professionals asking “why is the young person behaving in this way”. Research carried out by NatCen noted that: ‘Professionals working with sexually exploited boys and young men found that they were more likely to express their anger and trauma externally and be labelled as ‘aggressive’, ‘violent’, or an ‘offender’, whereas girls are more likely to internalise their distress’.
- Fear of being labelled gay, particularly in communities where there is homophobia, can prevent disclosure.
- There is too little recognition of the fact that a male can be both a victim and a perpetrator. The issue of victims who have a dual victim/offender role is clearly a very difficult one to tackle.
- Boys can be sexually exploited by peers, particularly in gang situations. The most common form of sexual exploitation and violence was in the form of pressure applied to males to take part in group-based sexual activities. Whether they wanted to participate or not, they did so out of fear or because of expectations.
- Research has found that male and female CSE victims share certain common traits but also exhibit significant differences in terms of, for example, disability and youth offending rates.
- It might be assumed that young men engaging in sex are doing so because they are highly sexualised, gay or bisexual, and not because they are being exploited.
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning (LGBTQ) Young People

Being LGBTQ does not make someone inherently vulnerable to CSE. However, research highlighted numerous factors that may result in LGBTQ young people becoming victims of sexual exploitation. Some LGBTQ young people may become vulnerable to being exploited because they feel isolated and believe that others will not accept their identity. They may also seek advice or support by either going online or attending adult gay clubs, particularly in more rural areas or in communities where being LGBTQ is considered unacceptable. In situations where young people, including LGBTQ young people, are looking to strangers for support, they are open to being exploited, have less control over the relationship and the type of sex they have, and can be influenced into believing that their abusive relationship is normal. LGBTQ young people can be particularly vulnerable to being influenced as there is less information that shows what a healthy gay relationship is, with most materials depicting heterosexual relationships.

Key Findings:

- LGBTQ young people may feel isolated and believe there will be a lack of acceptance by other people regarding their sexuality and gender identity. They may seek support via adult orientated groups, online or, in the case of boys and young men, in public sex environments such as ‘cottages’ or ‘cruising grounds’. The difficulty for some LGBTQ young people in finding sexual partners and relationships in similar safe spaces to those that are available to heterosexual young people can also make them vulnerable.
- There is little in the way of educational resources or general information that provides advice to LGBTQ young people about what a healthy relationship is.
- Societal attitudes towards sexual relationships among lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people can result in unhealthy or unsafe sexual relationships being accepted as ‘normal’.
- Young men may feel pressurised into having sex to ‘prove’ that they are gay. Professionals must not assume that a young man having sex with men is gay, rather than a willingness to explore whether there may be other reasons, such as being a victim of sexual exploitation.
- Professionals should only share information about a young person’s sexuality and gender identity if the young person has agreed that they can do this. Agreement should also be reached on those individuals with whom this information may be shared. The issue of ‘coming out’ was seen as a difficult one for some LGBTQ young people. Often, it is not a one-off event, but a process that can take time and involves the young person exploring their identity. Professionals should be aware of the risks to the child if they inform the family of the child’s sexual orientation. The child’s sexuality and gender identity should only be shared with the full and free consent of the child.
- Possible sexual exploitation in lesbian and trans relationships should be given equal consideration as sexual exploitation within gay relationships.
- LGBT communities might be reluctant to talk about or acknowledge CSE for fear of exacerbating homo/bi/transphobia.
Ethnicity and Faith

Victims of sexual exploitation come from all ethnic and faith backgrounds. ‘Ethnicity’ refers to a group of people whose members identify with each other through a common heritage, such as a common language, culture and ideology that stresses common ancestry. Religion refers to a belief system that forms attitudes and behaviours and may also impact on one’s identity over a period of time. While media reports tend to focus on victims who are white British, there are many sources that clearly indicate that victims from all ethnic origins are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, as they are to sexual abuse in general. By not fully understanding and raising awareness of the fact that victims can be found anywhere, children and young people are not being identified or communities made aware of sexual exploitation.

Key Findings:

- Community and faith groups are not homogenous and there can be a diversity of cultural and religious practices within communities.
- Female children and adults can be vulnerable to being groomed and sexually exploited, and are vulnerable to perpetrators from their own communities. This was based on evidence that the vast majority of offenders were from the victims’ own communities.
- Victims of sexual exploitation come from all ethnic backgrounds, regardless of how conservative or ‘protected’ children may appear.
- It can be harder to seek help for abuse in some communities due to cultural norms, religious beliefs or language barriers. A particular challenge is that boys and young men in some ethnic or faith groups are not able to seek help, due to fear, shame and/or embarrassment.
- Cultural and religious views and practices, particularly those that prize a female’s virginity or a male’s heterosexuality, may prevent victims from speaking out due to a fear of retribution or rejection from families.
- As well as cultural boundaries and expectations that prevent speaking out, there are also traditional practices in some communities that can pressurise victims of sexual exploitation to not speak out. One example raised during the roundtable was juju (black magic) particularly with those who have been trafficked. The fear of black magic tends to keep the victim with their perpetrator.
- Getting access to some communities can be very difficult for professionals, and there is often an assumption that community engagement should take place through male ‘community leaders’. Access to communities should be via a broad range of stakeholders, rather than solely through male religious leaders, and particularly through those with child-centred perspectives.
- Working through groups that are committed to child protection and to opposing violence and abuse, such as women’s organisations and others not often associated with CSE, could enable better identification of victims. There is a need for agencies to link with organisations specialising in forced marriage, FGM, honour-based violence and witchcraft to be better prepared to respond to the multiple issues that may arise.
Disabilities

Research conducted by the NSPCC states that, children and young people with a disability are three times more likely to be abused (including sexual, physical and emotional abuse) than non-disabled children. Disabled children at greatest risk of abuse are those with behaviour or conduct disorders, but research indicates that the needs of disabled children are often invisible, particularly in relation to those with learning disabilities that go undiagnosed. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England’s inquiry into CSE in gangs and groups found that learning disabilities were a typical vulnerability for victims of CSE, while research from the University of Bedfordshire found that 14% of 165 cases in one local authority related to a young person with a learning disability.

Key Findings:

- Children and young people with a disability are three times more likely to be abused than children without a disability. Within this group, children with behaviour or conduct disorders are particularly vulnerable.
- There is often a ‘perception that young people with learning disabilities don’t have a sexual identity, don’t have sexual urges, they’re not like their non-disabled peers who are exploring sexuality, often in a safe way’.
- Children and young people with disabilities are often over-protected and not informed about sex and relationships. The roundtables discussed that young people with disabilities can often be viewed as ‘unattractive’, with no one wanting to have sex with them. Furthermore, there was a view that parents and carers are often over-protective of children with disabilities. Being over-protective due to a belief that the young person is incapable of understanding such a complex subject may result in a lack of provision for or information about sex and relationships. This lack of information may be particularly noticeable in communities where it is forbidden to talk about sex.
- The transition from children’s services into independent living is a particularly vulnerable time for young people with disabilities.
- Learning difficulties or delayed development may be a consequence of trauma or sexual abuse.
- A lack of diagnosis and assessment for learning disabilities can result in a child’s behaviour being misunderstood, and exclusion from school. This can lead to the child being vulnerable to CSE.

Cross-cutting Issues

Children and young people experience a range of vulnerabilities relating to different aspects of their identity. Identity can mean many different things to one individual, so areas of vulnerability can overlap. The discussions held at the roundtables discussed the following issues:

**Normalisation of abuse:** When victims of sexual exploitation have been abused, they may believe that abuse is a normal part of a relationship, and so are unable to perceive themselves as victims. As well as being told by the perpetrator that the relationship is normal, victims of sexual exploitation may also come from backgrounds where violence and abuse are commonplace, which can normalise the abuse that takes place during sexual exploitation.
Developmental age and relationships: The real developmental age of a victim compared with their chronological age was discussed in both the disabilities and LGBTQ roundtables. Young people with learning disabilities may be unable to appropriately assess whether the situation they are in is risky and potentially harmful, yet professionals can sometimes judge them on their chronological age rather than looking at their developmental age and their ability to assess situations.

Non-identification of victims and vulnerabilities: it is critical to better understand how young people become victims of exploitation, what their routes into the abuse were, and whether there are certain factors or traits that make someone particularly vulnerable to CSE. By understanding the causes and correlates of abuse, professionals will be better able to protect children and young people and prevent their exploitation through early identification.

Schools and sex and relationships education: In order to help prevent abuse, it is vital that children and young people are equipped with the knowledge of how to spot unhealthy and risky relationships or sexual encounters and feel confident in reporting concerns. The provision of SRE (Sex and Relationships Education) in schools is crucial in getting this information across to all young people. It should include not only facts on the biological aspects of sex, but also: what is appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour; what constitutes a healthy relationship or sexual encounter; what is sexual consent; and where children can go to get advice or talk about their worries or problems. Provision of such information should start in primary school and be adapted to the age and needs of the child.

Youth groups and safe spaces: Youth clubs provide a space for young people to not only relax and have fun but also to develop self-esteem, build peer support, receive information on domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, and build resilience and strength in friendships. The roundtables recommended that the youth work should not depend on sessional and/or part-time youth workers, who might find it difficult to provide support to an individual outside of the group. Safe spaces for LGBTQ young people to meet, including youth group settings, are severely lacking and while straight young people may have clubs to go to, including sports clubs and so on, the same venues may not feel as comfortable or secure to a young person who is unsure about their sexuality or gender identity, or scared about coming out.

Stereotypical imagery: images of victims of sexual exploitation are portrayed as female victims and male perpetrators, with the presumption that the abuse is heterosexual. Posters, documents and other advice on sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are often aimed at females as victims and males as perpetrators, rather than recognising that all young people can be victims and/or perpetrators. Without seeing information that shows the risk facing all young people, rather than only heterosexual females, young people may be unaware of what an unhealthy relationship is, and may be more likely to be manipulated into abusive relationships. Information and advice needs to focus towards the public and professionals about the possibility and identify that victims come from diverse backgrounds, potential victims risk being neither identified nor provided with appropriate preventative advice.
Multi-agency working: CSE as a safeguarding and child protection issue is well established, statutory and non-statutory agencies have started to work together to provide a holistic response to the problem. However agencies working in silos without sharing information is a common criticism, especially as it is important that all the agencies come together to discuss individual cases. It is often only with joined-up working and agencies sharing the ‘pieces of the puzzle’ that sexual exploitation can be identified. Adult services need to work more holistically with children’s services. Local Safeguarding Boards must ensure that strategies preventing CSE and supporting victims are delivered at a local level by all the different agencies involved.

Data gathering and provision of services: The need for better collection, collation and analysis of data on CSE and how it was necessary for local areas to map the issue to better understand it locally was highlighted. Data gathering can be done through police analysts and services working on the frontline, it is also recommended that it could be done by being more creative and gathering it from areas not usually associated with sharing data, such as health agencies. To better understand CSE, local and national data must be routinely gathered. The development of local profiles can help police and partner agencies to develop a clearer understanding of how they can plan and operate to prevent sexual exploitation and target offenders.

Contact Us

To find out more about working with tri.x contact us on: Telephone: 024 7667 8053 or visit our website www.trixonline.co.uk.