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# Child Sexual Exploitation

## 1. Definition

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).  The definition of child sexual exploitation is as follows:

*"Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology"*

**Child sexual exploitation is never the victim’s fault, even if there is some form of exchange:** all children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.

## 2. Risks

Any child or young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation, regardless of their family background or other circumstances.

Sexual exploitation results in children and young people suffering harm and causes significant damage to their physical and mental health. It can also have profound and damaging consequences for the child’s family. Parents and carers are often traumatised and under severe stress. Siblings can feel alienated and their self-esteem affected. Family members can themselves suffer serious threats of abuse, intimidation, and assault at the hands of perpetrators.

There are strong links between children involved in sexual exploitation and other behaviours such as running away from home or care, bullying, self-harm, teenage pregnancy, truancy, and substance misuse. In addition, some children are particularly vulnerable, for example, children with special needs, those in residential or foster care, those leaving care, migrant children, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, victims of forced marriage and those involved in gangs.

There is also often a presumption that children are sexually exploited by people they do not know. However, evidence shows that this is often not the case and children are often sexually exploited by people with whom they feel they have a relationship, e.g., a boyfriend / girlfriend. Children are often persuaded that the boyfriend / girlfriend is their only true form of support and encouraged to withdraw from their friends and family and to place their trust only within the relationship.

Many children and young people are groomed into sexually exploitative relationships, but other forms of entry exist. Some young people are engaged in informal economies that incorporate the exchange of sex for rewards such as drugs, alcohol, money, or gifts. Others exchange sex for accommodation or money because of homelessness and experiences of poverty. Some young people have been bullied, coerced, and threatened into sexual activities by peers or gang members which is then used against them as a form of extortion and to keep them compliant.

Due to the nature of the grooming methods used by their abusers, it is very common for children and young people who are sexually exploited not to recognise that they are being abused. Practitioners should be aware that particularly young people aged 16 and 17 may believe themselves to be acting voluntarily and will need practitioners to work with them so they can recognise that they are being sexually exploited. This is not an issue, which affects only girls and young women, but boys and young men are also exploited. However, they often may experience other barriers to disclosure.

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child Sexual Abuse. It can take many forms from the seemingly ‘consensual’ relationship where sex is exchanged for attention, accommodation, or gifts, to serious organised crime and child trafficking. (Human trafficking is the movement of a person from one place to another into conditions of exploitation, using deception, coercion, the abuse of power or the abuse of someone’s vulnerability). What marks out exploitation is an imbalance of power within the relationship. The perpetrator always holds power over the victim, increasing the dependence of the victim as the exploitative relationship develops.

Technology such as mobile phones or social networking sites, can play a part in sexual exploitation, for example, through their use to record abuse and share it with other like-minded individuals or as a medium to access children and young people to groom them. Online child sexual exploitation can be particularly challenging to identify and respond to. Technology allows perpetrators to be in contact with multiple potential victims at any one time. It also offers a perception of anonymity, for both children and young people and perpetrators, making it easier to say and do things online that they would not do offline. This eases the grooming process and facilitates more rapid sexualisation of perpetrator approaches to potential victims.

Where exploitation does occur online (through the exchange of sexual communication or images, for example) these can be quickly and easily shared with others. This makes it difficult to contain the potential for further abuse and presents significant challenges around content removal. Online abuse is further complicated by the fact that it can transcend national borders.

Sexual exploitation has strong links with other forms of crime, for example, Domestic Violence and Abuse, online and offline grooming, the distribution of abusive images of children and child trafficking.

The perpetrators of sexual exploitation are often well organised and use sophisticated tactics. They are known to target areas where children and young people gather without much adult supervision, e.g., parks, takeaway outlets or shopping centres or sites on the Internet.

Children and young people may have already been sexually exploited before they are referred to Children’s Social Care; others may become targets of perpetrators whilst living at home or during placements. They are often the focus of perpetrators of sexual abuse due to their vulnerability. All practitioners and foster carers should therefore create an environment which educates children and young people about child sexual exploitation, involving relevant outside agencies where appropriate.

## 3. Consent

A child cannot consent to their own abuse. It is important to bear in mind that:

* A child under the age of 13 is not legally capable of consenting to sex (it is statutory rape) or any other type of sexual touching;
* Sexual activity with a child under 16 is an offence;
* It is an offence for a person to have a sexual relationship with a 16- or 17-year-old if they hold a position of trust or authority in relation to them;
* Where sexual activity with a 16- or 17-year-old does not result in an offence being committed, it may still result in harm, or the likelihood of harm being suffered;
* Non-consensual sex is rape whatever the age of the victim;
* If the victim is incapacitated through drink or drugs, or the victim or their family has been subject to violence or the threat of it, they cannot be considered to have given true consent; therefore, offences may have been committed;
* Child sexual exploitation is therefore a child protection issue for all children under the age of 18 years and not just those in a specific age group.

Practitioners must also consider other factors which might influence the ability of the person to give consent, e.g. learning disability / mental ill health.

Although a child may sometimes appear to be making an informed choice, young people cannot and do not 'choose' abuse or exploitation. Recognising the underlying factors that can exacerbate risk will help practitioners understand and interpret apparent 'choices' and avoid the danger of apportioning blame.

## 4. Vulnerability & Indicators

The following are typical vulnerabilities in children prior to abuse:

* Living in a chaotic or dysfunctional household (including parental substance use, domestic violence, parental mental health issues, parental 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 (in cases of gang associated CSE only);
* 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;
* Lacking friends from the same age group;
* Living in a gang neighbourhood;
* Living in residential care;
* Living in hostel, bed and breakfast accommodation or a foyer;
* Low self-esteem or self-confidence;
* Young carer.

The following signs and behaviour may be seen in children who are already being sexually exploited:

* Missing from home or care;
* Physical injuries;
* Drug or alcohol misuse;
* Involvement in offending;
* Repeat sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and terminations;
* Absent from school;
* Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites;
* Estranged from their family;
* Unexplained Money/gifts;
* Recruiting others into exploitative situations;
* Change in peer groups;
* Poor mental health;
* Self-harm;
* Thoughts of or attempts at suicide.

Evidence shows that any child displaying several vulnerabilities from the above lists should be at high risk of sexual exploitation. Professionals should immediately start an investigation to determine the risk, along with preventative and protective action as required. However, it is important to note that children without pre-existing vulnerabilities can still be sexually exploited. Therefore, any child showing risk indicators in the second list, but none of the vulnerabilities in the first, should also be considered as a potential victim, with appropriate assessment and action put in place as required.

## 5. Child on Child abuse

Child on child abuse is any form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive control exercised between children, and within children's relationships (both intimate and non-intimate), friendships, and wider peer associations. Child on child abuse can take various forms, including (but not limited to): serious bullying (including cyber- bullying), relationship abuse, domestic violence and abuse, child sexual exploitation, youth and serious youth violence, harmful sexual behaviour and/or prejudice-based violence including, but not limited to, gender-based violence. Online child on child abuse is any form of child on child abuse with a digital element, for example, sexting, online abuse, coercion and exploitation, child on child grooming, threatening language delivered via online means, the distribution of sexualised content, and harassment." It is important to consider the context in which any child on child abuse is taking place, as this will inform the best to approach working with and supporting the child. You may need to refer to guidance on other forms of abuse such as domestic violence and abuse, harmful sexual behaviour, involvement in gangs and criminal exploitation. Sometimes sexual bullying in schools and other social settings can lead to the sexual exploitation of young people by their peers, or young women and young men who have themselves been exploited can be coerced into recruiting other young people to be abused. Sexual exploitation also occurs within and between street gangs, where sex is used in exchange for safety, protection, drugs and simply belonging. This can result in children both experiencing child sexual exploitation and perpetrating it at the same time. When consider children and young people in relation to child sexual exploitation. A referral to Children's Services Integrated Front door for consideration of risk and need.

## 6. Children and Young People who go Missing

Please refer to the Children Missing from Care, Home and Education Procedure. A significant number of children and young people who are being sexually exploited may go Missing from home or care, and education. Some go missing frequently; the more often they go missing the more vulnerable they are to being sexually exploited. If a child does go missing, the Children Missing from Home or Care Procedure should be followed.

Independent Return Interviews with the child or young person can help in establishing why they went missing and the subsequent support that may be required, as well as preventing repeat incidents. Information gathered from return interviews can be used to inform the identification for Referral and Assessment of any child sexual exploitation cases. All return home interviews are reviewed by the Missing Officer who checks for any indication or correlation between the missing episode and any cause for concern around potential exploitation.

## 7. Protection & Action to be taken

Child Sexual Exploitation can have an impact on children and young people and their families It should be a concern for everyone. CSE is largely a hidden crime and raising awareness of this type of abuse is essential to preventing it and stopping it early when it does happen. Councils play a crucial, statutory role in safeguarding children, including tackling child sexual exploitation. However, they cannot do this alone. It needs the cooperation of the wider community and our partner agencies. Key principles to adhere to are as follows.

* A child-centred approach. Action should be focused on the child's needs, including consideration of children with needs or sensitivities, and the fact that children do not always acknowledge what may be an exploitative or abusive situation;
* A proactive approach. This should be focused on prevention, early identification, and intervention as well as disrupting activity and prosecuting perpetrators;
* Parenting, family life, and services. Taking account of family circumstances in deciding how best to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people;
* The rights of children and young people. Children and young people are entitled to be safeguarded from sexual exploitation just as agencies have duties in respect of safeguarding and promoting welfare;
* Responsibility for criminal acts. Sexual exploitation of children and young people should not be regarded as criminal behaviour on the part of the child or young person, but as child sexual abuse. The responsibility for the sexual exploitation of children lies with the abuser and the focus of police investigations should be on those who coerce, exploit and abuse children and young people;
* An integrated approach. Working Together to Safeguard Children sets out a tiered approach to safeguarding: universal, targeted, and responsive. Within this, child sexual exploitation requires a three-pronged approach tackling prevention, protection and prosecution;
* A shared responsibility. The need for effective joint working between different agencies and professionals underpinned by a strong commitment from managers, a shared understanding of the problem of sexual exploitation and effective coordination by the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Wherever there are concerns raised that a child is being sexually exploited, professionals should ensure that they consult with the Threshold of Need Guidance 2024/28, this incorporates risks around both harm within the home and harm outside of the home. Professionals should ensure that they complete the exploitation screening tool, where safeguarding concerns are identified, a referral should be made to the Integrated Front Door (IFD). If you are unsure of next steps to be taken, please seek supervision.

Where concerns are identified for Exploitation requiring statutory intervention, consideration can be given to progression to Pre MACE to ensure that the plan around the child is robust and responsive to the needs of the child. Whereby concerns continue to escalate the chair of Pre MACE will decide to progress the case to MACE (Multi Agency Child exploitation meeting) whereby senior level oversight can occur. All actions recommended around the exploitation concerns should be incorporated into the child’s main statutory plan. Practitioners from statutory agencies and voluntary sector organisations together with the child or young person, foster carers, and his / her family as appropriate, should agree on the services which should be provided to them and how they will be coordinated.

The local authority and partners have a vast number of resources and differing interventions that will be implemented where there are concerns of this nature. The types of intervention offered should be appropriate to their needs and should take full account of identified risk factors and their individual circumstances.

## 8. Elements To Consider when Addressing Child Sexual Exploitation

Working with sexually exploited children is a complex issue which can involve serious crime and investigations over a wide geographical area.  Children may be frightened of the consequences of disclosure and may need to be given time to discuss their experiences. The need to share information discreetly in a timely fashion has been shown to be vital in these cases.

Agencies and practitioners involved with a child or young person experiencing child sexual exploitation must consider disruption strategies which support the child or young person to exit the exploitative situation. The prosecution and disruption of perpetrators is an essential part of the process in reducing harm. It is the responsibility of the police to gather evidence, investigate and interview perpetrators and prepare case files for consideration by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) with the intention of obtaining the successful conviction of offenders. Consideration should be given to collating evidence to a standard where evidence based (victimless) prosecutions can be considered due to the engagement issues around exploitation.

Many child sexual exploitation cases cross police force boundaries and therefore there should be cross boundary cooperation and information sharing. This may involve the National Crime Agency's CEOP Command (formerly the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre) who can support the police by helping to coordinate cross boundary or international investigations involving child sex offender networks or in the management of high risk offenders which may involve grooming through chat rooms and social networking sites or involvement with sex offender rings.

## 9. Identifying and Prosecuting Perpetrators

The police and criminal justice agencies lead on the identification and prosecution of perpetrators. All practitioners, however, have a role in gathering, recording and sharing information with the police and other agencies, as appropriate and in agreement with them.

Practitioners and foster carers should bear in mind that sexual exploitation often does not occur in isolation and has links to other crime types, including:

* Child trafficking (into, out of and within the UK);
* Domestic Violence and Abuse;
* Sexual violence in intimate relationships;
* Grooming (both online and offline);
* Abusive images of children and their distribution (organised abuse);
* Organised sexual abuse of children;
* Drugs-related offences (dealing, consuming and cultivating);
* Gang-related activity;
* Immigration-related offences;
* Domestic servitude.

## 10. Further Information & Required Documents

Helping Supporting and Protecting Children and Families in North East Lincolnshire Threshold of Need [NEL-Threshold-Document-2024-28-FINAL-refresh-May-2025.pdf](https://www.nelincs.gov.uk/assets/uploads/2025/07/NEL-Threshold-Document-2024-28-FINAL-refresh-May-2025.pdf)

North East Lincolnshire Process for Identification & Intervention where child exploitation concerns [N-E-Lincs-Exploitation-Risk-Assessment-Tool.docx](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nelincs.gov.uk%2Fassets%2Fuploads%2F2025%2F05%2FN-E-Lincs-Exploitation-Risk-Assessment-Tool.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

North East Lincolnshire Exploitation Risk Assessment Tool

North East Lincolnshire Exploitation Risk Analysis Framework [SCP Risk analysis framework](https://www.nelincs.gov.uk/assets/uploads/2025/05/Risk-analysis-framework-updated-Sept.-2024-1-3.pdf)