



Guidance Booklet

Working with victims of Child Exploitation: Skills and Practice



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Working with victims of Child Exploitation: skills and practice information booklet

This document has been devised to give information to practitioners who are working with or could be working with children and young people at risk of exploitation. It takes you through what exploitation is, how to begin the work with children and young people, what subjects you might have to cover and how to eventually end the work you are doing. We will look at some resources that are available for you to use, that might be of help.

It should be read alongside your Local Authority safeguarding policy and procedures.

What is Child Exploitation?

Child Exploitation is a form of abuse where a child is forced or coerced into doing things for the benefit of others, it is often a gradual process and people may not even recognise that they are being exploited until their situation becomes very serious.

The child or young person is groomed by being given money, gifts, drugs, alcohol, attention or a sense of belonging. This is usually in exchange for either carrying out sexual activity (child sexual exploitation) or for criminal activity (child criminal exploitation).

Child exploitation can take many forms and can take place in a range of situations. It can happen anywhere and can affect any age, gender, or ethnicity.

Abusers will use their power and control over the child or young person, making them feel that they have no choice in any of this. They will coerce and manipulate them and even hold them indebted to them.

Every child caught up in exploitation must be seen as victims of the abuse, it is not their fault and they are not to blame.

Extra-Familial Harm:

Extra-familial harm is when the harm comes from outside the family home. Traditionally we have seen safeguarding risks coming from the family home and from the parents and carers, but this is not always the case. We are seeing significant safeguarding risks from outside the family home. From drug related crimes, gang association and youth violence.

It is thought that adolescents are more vulnerable to extra-familial harm as they are allowed more freedom and have more independence. Peers have much more influence over them and family influence declines. When we look at these factors and the fact that adolescents are going through massive changes in their bodies, from the physical, emotional and cognitive changes, it is no wonder they are more open to risky behaviours.

Sometimes parents might be unaware that their child is at risk, or they may be really struggling with trying to keep their child safe. It is the factors that are being offered to the child that is tempting towards the risk. We call these **pull factors**.

Sometimes, though, it can be parental neglect or lack of supervision that can cause exposure to extra-familial harm. We know that children who have instability or unrest at home are less likely to want to be there, and more likely to spend time away from the home. We call these **push factors**.

Tackling exploitation practice principles

These multi-agency principles are designed to support effective partnership working. They provide a framework for better responses and support for young people who are or at risk of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. There are 8 practice principles that have been devised. These principles are derived from discussions with young people themselves, parents, carers and professionals, so are evidenced-informed and take a holistic approach to tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm. The 8 principles are interrelated and interdependent and taken together will offer collaborative and creative responses to CE and extra-familial harm.

The Practice principles:

1. **Put children and young people first:** All children are entitled to support and protection that is child-centred. This has not always been done when it comes to exploitation and extra-familial harm. It means keeping the CYP in focus when making decisions about them and working with them and their parents/carers.
2. **Recognise and challenge inequalities, exclusion and discrimination:** Discrimination can come in many different forms, from racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism to name but a few. Inequalities and marginalisation can be both a driver for, and a consequence of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. It means we have to create an inclusive environment where people feel respected regardless of their race, culture, ethnicity, sex, gender or social characteristics. We must allow those that feel marginalised to have a voice and to not tolerate injustices.
3. **Respect the voices, experiences and expertise of children and young people:** All CYP have a right to have their say and to be listened to. Listening, hearing and responding to what CYP say means that we can build a trusting relationship, which in turn allows professional to better engage. This then can lead to increase safety. When we listen and respond to children and young people we are working with them rather than 'doing to them'.
4. **Be strength-based and relationship-based:** We need to see the strengths in the children and young people's lives and work holistically with them, rather than just focussing on the risks that they face or being harmed. We can then build relationships with them and better understand their lives. This way it enhances protection, safety and resilience.
5. **Recognise and respond to trauma:** The impact of trauma is wide reaching and so understanding this and responding to it in an effective way, is key. What professionals see from children and young people through their behaviour and their ability to develop trusting relationships can be a result of the trauma that they have suffered.
6. **Be curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable:** We must be professionally curious in order to respond to the complexity of child

exploitation and extra-familial harm. We need to critically think about what is happening and analyse the information that is presented to us, in order to build an accurate picture of what is unfolding in the area with regards to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. We need to also understand what is happening in the child's life and to keep up to date with new developments and thoughts around the issue.

7. **Approach parents and carers as partners wherever possible:** Parents and carers can offer invaluable expertise about their child and what is happening to them, and the context of where it is happening. They can provide information about the exploiter, unsafe places and what is happening within the community. Working in partnership with parents and carers can improve agencies support with children and young people and to keep them safe.
8. **Create safe spaces and places for children and young people:** In order to tackle child exploitation and extra-familial harm successfully, we need to think about the context of where the harm is coming from. We need to engage in these places and spaces that children and young people spend their time in. When we are looking at these places, we need to consider what potential harms are there and what we can do to address these. Working in this way allows professionals to consider the wider pattern of harm and to see a bigger picture of everyone that might be using the space. We can then think about how we could potentially prevent this harm or address the issues.

Good beginnings

How you begin the work with young people is very important to get right. They will be nervous about meeting you and may not know anything about who you are or the organisation you work for. Try to reassure the young person that you are not offering support because they have done something wrong (if this is possible). Make sure you are open and honest about confidentiality and information sharing. This helps the young person feel that they have some control over their information. Try and role model respect, pace and getting to know each other. This will help the CYP understand the expectations right at the beginning. Try and consider the practical arrangements, what times and places work for the young people? They are more likely to stick to arrangements. Try and have an open referral policy when possible. This helps the young person to know what you know about them. Consider triggers and the window of tolerance (we will talk about this later) and finally can you plan for some basic needs – does the young person need to eat, drink, sleep, etc before they can talk to you?

Building trusting relationship is key. You don't need to be 'cool' or 'liked'. Model calm, consistent, and safe adults that children can rely on.

Always come from the position of thinking that the young person has a distrust of services and has been told not to speak. This could come from exploiters or by their family and this will be a barrier to them seeking safety.

Thoughts, feelings and behaviours

When you are working with children who are or are at risk of exploitation and extra-familial harm will be feeling all sorts of mixed emotions. Because of this they will show you all sorts of behaviours, be prepared for these.

They might be thinking that it is their fault, that they can't be fixed or that there is no way out, so what is the point of doing any of this work. They might have feelings of shame, embarrassment or fear. They may blame themselves for the abuse. They may feel guilty or have confusion about what has been happening.

Some behaviours you might see are avoidance of you or the work you want to do, they might think that it is too dangerous to engage with you. They might be very difficult to get hold of and be very inconsistent with their engagement as they are at the beck and call of the abuser.

What you need to keep remembering is that it is not them, it is because of the abuse that they are suffering and that they need you to be there for them and consistent with your approach.

Grooming

What is Grooming?

Grooming is fundamentally important in the exploitation process. It is how the perpetrator finds, gets to know and then takes advantage of the child or young person.

It is an extremely powerful way in which a perpetrator builds a connection with the child, in order to coerce or deceive them into an exploitative situation.

A perpetrator will target a young person, they will look out for their vulnerabilities and then take advantage of these. Once they have got the child's attention, they will then shower them with gifts, friendship and love. The young person will not see this as anything apart from a person being nice to them and will accept the things that are being offered. The perpetrator is fulfilling the need that they have seen in this child.

They will then begin to isolate the child or young person away from their friends and family and encourage reliance and dependence.

The perpetrator will try and trap the child or young person, they will do this by making them come back to them for something. This could be by making them dependent on drugs and alcohol. To get more drugs and alcohol they need to go back to the person who they know can supply it for them – their new 'friend!' Or they make them have a debt that they have to pay back, the only way to pay that debt back is by taking part in sexual activity or by having to sell more drugs.

In all of this the perpetrator has control of the child and of the situation.

Online harm

Working with CYP and discussing the online world is really important as we need to understand and recognise what they are doing online. We need them to make sure they feel that they can come and talk to us if they feel that they have done

something they might regret or if they have been put in a position where they are finding it difficult. We need to make sure they understand that it is not their fault and that they have someone to turn to and talk to. There is a real rise in the production of 'self-generated' images that CYP are being coerced into producing. Children are also being targeted on gaming platforms.

Trauma

As highlighted in practice principle 5, recognise and respond to trauma, it is vitally important that we think about this when we are working directly with children and young people who are being or at risk of being exploited. When people suffer trauma that brain stops making memories and it shuts down. It goes into survival mode and reacts in the flight, flight, freeze, flop and friend responses. This is because the upstairs brain (the cortex, where we make good decisions) loses connection with the downstairs brain (the amygdala, where we get all our big feelings from) and goes offline. This means that we are not rationally thinking about what is going on and just surviving in the moment. We go out of our window of tolerance. When we are out of our window of tolerance, we are unlikely to learn anything. When doing CE work we need to try to keep CYP in their window of tolerance.

People who have experienced trauma are more likely to have false alarms as their window of tolerance is smaller.

Having a small window means that we are less able to tolerate things and are more likely to be triggered into shooting out of our window. With repetition, the routes of shooting out of our window become entrenched and they become more easily accessible. This increases the triggering of false alarms. If children have not developed effective coping strategies, their overactive alarm system becomes progressively more severe into adulthood.

How shame restricts windows: Feeling "defective," children develop maladaptive defences in order to avoid shame, which further shrinks their ability to cope with uncomfortable emotions. These defences may include:

- Lying
- Avoidance
- Minimisation
- Blame

Reflection on the window of tolerance in both ourselves as well as the children we work with, will enable us to be more mindful and recognise how we're feeling against our windows. This will help us, and the children, develop the self-regulation skills to get us back inside the window, to handle the situation more appropriately.

Healthy relationships

No relationship is perfect, each having a mix of healthy and unhealthy characteristics. While people often spend a lot of time talking about how to spot an unhealthy relationship, they don't necessarily discuss what constitutes a healthy one.

When talking to children and young people about healthy relationships, it's helpful to ask the questions such as these:

- Do you have trust in one another?
- Do you respect each other?
- Do you support each other's interests and efforts?
- Are you honest and open with each other?
- Are you able to maintain your individual identity?
- Do you talk about your feelings, hopes, fears, and dreams?
- Do you feel and express fondness and affection?

We need to do a lot of work around health relationships because if CYP can recognise and understand what one is then they can hopefully start to realise that an exploitative relationship is not healthy.

Vulnerability

Everyone is vulnerable at some time in their lives and talking about vulnerabilities with children and young people starts them thinking about their own vulnerabilities. We need them to realise that these are not their fault and to work with them to build up resilience. An abuser will target anyone who is vulnerable, and they will justify the abuse by saying that it is the fault of the victim because they are the vulnerable one. Obviously, this is not the case. If we can help CYP to start to recognise that they may have some vulnerabilities, we can start to help them become stronger and to move away from the abuse/exploitative situation.

Consent

Consent is an ongoing mutual agreement between partners about what they do or don't want to experience. When considering whether acts in your relationship are consensual, CYP should keep in mind:

- Consent isn't as simple as "no means no" or "yes means yes." Consent is a safe, open, and ongoing conversation about the activities you and your partner are comfortable with and actively want to experience together.
- Consent should happen every time. You and your partner should feel safe letting each other know if you're not comfortable with something, every time. Consent is a process to be established on an ongoing basis, not broad approval based on past behaviour. In a healthy relationship, you always have the right to set and adjust your boundaries based on what you're comfortable with in the moment.
- Your relationship status isn't consent. Whether it's the first time or the hundredth, a casual or committed relationship, nobody is ever obligated to give consent, even if you've done so before. You are the only one with ownership of your body.
- Consent isn't a free pass. Saying yes to one act doesn't imply your consent to others and every act of physical intimacy requires its own consent. If you feel uncomfortable in the moment, you always have the right to stop, even if you previously agreed.
- There's no such thing as implied consent. Flirting with someone, talking to them, or the absence of 'no' are not consent. Consent only happens when all parties voluntarily, explicitly, and enthusiastically agree.

- It's not consent if you're afraid or unable to say no, or manipulated, pressured, or threatened to say yes. It's also not consent if you or your partner are unable to give consent, including if you're asleep, unconscious, or under the influence of substances like alcohol, some prescription medications, and other drugs.
- Nonconsent means stop. If anyone involved isn't consenting, then what's happening is or could be rape, sexual assault, or abuse.

Endings

How you finish your work with CYP is very important, we all want to have a good ending to the work we have done with our children and young people.

Top tips for a good ending:

- Negotiated and agreed.
- Prepared for.
- Staggered – gradual reduction in support.
- Review the journey and progress (closing summary or Write young person a letter – reminiscing all the good times you remember with them, take them on a journey of your involvement and what led you to close and look to the future – that you will always think of them.)
- Celebrated (closing activity of young persons choice)
- Reflect the strengths of the young person and why you feel they can cope.
- Acknowledge the normal sense of loss for worker and young person.
- Clear about next steps – can the young person contact the project again in future?
- Safety planning re what services or people will be staying with them – who can they go to if they are worried?