

Child Sexual Exploitation: Problems and Solutions from the perspectives of young people and professionals

Dr Sophie Hallett

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Key messages for policy and practice

- Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is complex and intimately bound up with other problems and difficulties young people are experiencing.
- There are multiple forms of sexual exploitation, including young people who 'sell' and exchange sex as a way of coping with adversity. Central to an understanding of CSE is that underpinning the exchange of sex is the meeting (and taking advantage) of unmet needs.
- Policy and practice guidance on CSE should include other kinds of transactional sex which may be more transient, but still raise questions about the range of choices available to young people. This can mean that they exchange sex for financial, emotional or material payment.
- 'Grooming' as an operational model can be problematic for professionals. It does not always fully explain how some young people come to experience sexual exploitation. For some young people the exchange of sex is a coping response, made within severely adverse circumstances.
- A reworking of the grooming model may be needed to recognize that some children and young people can be aware of the coercive nature of their relationships. Greater weight and attention should be given to the reasons why they may want to stay in exploitative relationships.
- Tackling the underlying problems and difficulties experienced by young people is key to responding to CSE. Dealing with sexual exploitation as an isolated issue may, conversely, end up leaving young people more vulnerable if these other problems (i.e. substance misuse, housing, mental health) are not also addressed.
- Creating opportunities for young people to build positive relationships is vital. Promoting young people's active participation in their own support is key.



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Background

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is relatively new to social care and child protection policy, legislation and guidance. The term 'child sexual exploitation' was introduced in Wales and other UK nations in 2009 (see DCSF, 2009; WAG 2011). Research about CSE has focussed on identifying risk factors and appropriate interventions. Much of this research has been quantitative, and based on case file analysis. Little is known about young people's perspectives.

Findings from research have raised concerns about the low awareness of CSE. This is particularly so amongst practitioners and those who are in a position to identify and refer young people. There are concerns that young people may be viewed as troublesome, or making lifestyle choices, rather than being seen as vulnerable.

The research study

This was a qualitative study. The aim was to understand more about what CSE is and what can and should be done about it – from the perspectives of young people, and professionals who have a key role to play in identifying and responding to CSE. The research involved 9 young people with experiences of CSE, and 25 professionals from policing, health, education, youth work, third sector and social work backgrounds.

Key findings: Young people's perspectives

The young people felt they had been vulnerable to CSE because of issues that left them feeling 'blotted out'. They felt invisible in various ways to practitioners, their families, and those who should have helped them. The young people considered that CSE could happen to anyone having to manage without the care, attention and support that most people need. Key vulnerabilities were:

Instability in their care, and uncertainty about or lack of place to call and feel at home; Feelings of difference and exclusion from what they considered to be normal life; Difficulties with family and relationships with other key figures; Confusion about sex and their bodies.

Risks were spoken of by the young people as their ways of coping with feelings of vulnerability. Risky activities were a way of asserting themselves and feeling in control. Key risks were:

- 'Hiding away': some young people may isolate themselves from friends, family, school, and feel safer communicating to people through text messages, instant chat and chat rooms online.

- 'Hanging out': some young people may be out in groups and crowds. They may be visible in public spaces, such as on the street and in parks. Hanging out in the crowd can be a way of hiding away how they feel inside.

- Alcohol and drugs: for some young people, the only control they feel they have is over how out of control they can get.

'Alcohol influences you, you know, so you don't know what you are doing, same with drugs. It means you don't have to care anymore, you don't have to think about anything. You think you can do anything' - Sarah

- Sex: for some young people, sex or 'sleeping around' can be a way of regaining power over their bodies. Exchanging sex for things can be a way of finding and replacing value on what they feel has been cheapened.

'It cheapens it a bit. Like you think, oh well I may as well get paid for doing it' - Katie

Sexual exploitation can happen as a result of grooming and bad relationships. It can occur in encounters where young people find themselves in situations where they feel they have no choice other than to exchange sex or sexual activity. It can happen when young people feel that 'selling sex' is a way of meeting their needs.



For some young people, exchanging sex can sometimes seem to be the only solution, or 'least worst' option. The young people all spoke of their experiences as people taking advantage of their vulnerabilities, or meeting a need they had. Importantly, young people were adamant that CSE is preventable. As Nathan tells us:

'this doesn't just happen, it happens because either things just aren't addressed, people are less able to fend for themselves and they don't get the help that they need, for whatever reason, and are put into difficult positions and sometimes it DOES take them there and if, people were there to help them in the first place then they wouldn't, then this wouldn't happen' – Nathan

Key findings: Professionals perspectives

The professionals considered that any young person could be sexually exploited. Their concerns centred on young people who are outside of positive adult influences, protection and supervision. The most vulnerable were considered to be those who:

- Have experienced instability in their lives
- Receive a lack of attention and have experienced emotional neglect
- Have confused and concerning relationships and boundaries, particularly with regards to touch
- Have no one person looking out for them.

The professionals displayed concerns that the experience of care might contribute to a young person's vulnerability. They were concerned about the lack of attention and physical displays of affection experienced by young people involved in social services. They spoke about the limitations of the professional role, the need to maintain professional boundaries, and the lack of time, or remit to be able to support young

people in the way they would like. There were different and multiple understandings about the ways that young people may come to exchange sex. CSE can be a form of grooming and coercion, conditions and rewards in abusive relationships, peer bullying, an outcome of 'party' lifestyles, and as young people exchanging sex to meet a need. The professionals all spoke of the difficulties identifying CSE. A number of professionals displayed some confusion and uncertainty about what CSE is. Some talked directly about this confusion.

'There are the worst case scenarios and then there is that whole area in between' - Matthew, youth worker

Some professionals struggled to know how to make sense of young people's involvement in CSE when grooming did not feature. They also talked of difficulties with getting colleagues to recognise young people as being sexually exploited. They spoke about the challenges of working with young people involved in CSE.

'a young person can only be helped when they want to, um you know with the best will in the world and lots and lots and lots of training it is very hard to help someone who doesn't want to be helped' - Cathy, fostering

The importance of inter-agency working with other professionals is key to working with young people involved in CSE. Professionals highlighted the important role for youth mentors, and those who can build relationships with young people. They spoke of the need to respond to those vulnerabilities that can make a young person at risk of CSE.

'It's building good positive relationships with young people and that being beneficial in and of itself' - Max, children's residential care

These messages are important and have implications for policy and practice. As Leah tells us: *'they need to hear people like me'*.

Further Details

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References

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