

Safeguarding in Education Service

Briefing: The role of schools, colleges and academies in protecting children from sexual exploitation

May 2013

Introduction:

The issue of child sexual exploitation (CSE) has received much media coverage in recent months. This is due to high profile incidents and subsequent inquiries. The Office of the Children's Commissioner (England) is undertaking an inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. The final report is due to be published in September 2013. More details can be found on the [Office of the Children's Commissioner](#) website.

The role of schools and the education sector is included in various documents (see references below) as part of a multi-agency response to this complex and serious issue. This briefing paper sets out to:

- Define child sexual exploitation.
- List signs and indicators of sexual exploitation.
- Outline the role of schools in protecting pupils who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.
- Consider how the issue can be explored through the curriculum.

Definition

The NSPCC definition of child sexual exploitation is: "*When someone grooms and controls a child for a sexual purpose. It can happen to boys and girls, it can happen in rural and urban areas, it can happen face to face and it can happen online.*" NSPCC 2011.

There are many different activities that can be described as sexual exploitation and these can be defined in two ways: sexual exploitation through street grooming and online sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation through street grooming includes:

- Befriending, gaining trust, giving gifts, giving drugs and alcohol, performing sexual acts in exchange for something.
- Movement of children within the UK for the purpose of sexual abuse (also known as trafficking), and trafficking children to the UK for the same purpose.
- Child prostitution.

Online sexual exploitation includes:

- Befriending through chat rooms, social networking, email and text messages.
- Asking children to participate in non-contact sexual activities online.
- Taking and sharing of indecent images online.
- Using online means to arrange to meet a child in person for the purpose of sexual abuse.

Further detailed information on the nature of child sexual exploitation can be found on [NSPCC Inform](#).

Signs and indicators of child sexual exploitation

As defined above, child sexual exploitation can affect any child or young person. However, some groups of children and young people are particularly vulnerable. These groups include:

- Looked After Children.
- Those who have been abused in the past.
- Those who are regularly absent from school, have been excluded or who have disengaged from education.
- Refugee and unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- Those with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- Those with mental health difficulties.
- Those who use drugs and alcohol.

Children and young people who are being sexually exploited can struggle to understand and identify that they are being sexually exploited. Signs and indicators of child sexual exploitation include:

- Going missing repeatedly.
- Physical injuries (cigarette burns and slash wounds in particular).
- Drug and alcohol misuse.
- Offending.
- Self-harm.
- Rapid change in appearance.
- Unexplained gifts, for example, mobile phones.

- Truancing from school.
- Associating with others who are vulnerable or who are known to be involved with sexual exploitation.

The role of schools in protecting children and young people from sexual exploitation:

The interim report of the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) inquiry into sexual exploitation (November 2012) aimed to establish an accurate figure of the victims of sexual exploitation. Over a 14 month period, it identified 2,409 victims and 16,500 children identified as being at risk. Media coverage of this report has largely centred on the controversy surrounding the ethnicity of perpetrators, mainly with reference to the high profile case in Rotherham. This distracts from the extent of the issue and assumptions about ethnicity, age or gender could lead to some children not being identified and protected. Significantly for schools, comments to the Education Select Committee from the OCC in February 2013 indicate that there is reluctance amongst some schools to acknowledge that some bullying in schools amounts to sexual abuse and sexual violence and that this will reflect negatively on the reputation of the school. It may also be that staff in schools find it difficult to comprehend the nature and scale of this type of sexual abuse.

A whole school approach:

All children and young people are at risk of online sexual exploitation and schools should ensure that their e-safety procedures are robust and that pupils are taught about online risks, how to recognise unsafe online contact and be confident to report any concerns about themselves or peers to staff in school.

A commitment from senior management and governors in the school to deal with the issue of child sexual exploitation is needed to ensure it is done in an appropriate and supportive way. Working with any key contacts in the local authority or from a local specialist agency can help to address gaps in knowledge and can identify useful teaching strategies and resources. Training for all staff to raise awareness of the issue helps to stress the importance of covering the subject, but also consider training/awareness raising sessions for parents perhaps delivered by specialist agencies in conjunction with the school. Working in partnership with the LSCB will help to support the school with any child protection concerns that arise as a result of this area of work. Working with local groups will help to present information that is relevant to the local area. Linking with national events and media coverage of the issue can be a very effective way of engaging young people.

Teaching about difficult and sensitive issues requires confidence and courage. It can be challenging to find the appropriate time and commitment to teaching about sexual exploitation and rather than being taught as a 'one off' lesson or set of lessons it needs to be part of the whole school approach to developing positive relationships, confidence and personal safety skills. Involving young people by consulting them about their concerns can help with planning relevant learning experiences. Linking the teaching with relevant school policies, including those on sex and relationships education, e-safety, anti-bullying and child protection will help to ensure clear links with the whole school ethos and also help to take

account of cultural and faith dimensions.

Addressing healthy relationships and sexual exploitation:

Children and young people need to be taught about healthy relationships and although this is usually taught through the PSHE curriculum, schools can promote healthy friendships and relationships through their whole school ethos, their behaviour policy and anti-bullying work. Schools need to teach pupils how to make positive choices in their relationships and make informed decisions so that they can protect themselves from sexual exploitation.

Establishing positive relationships in school will help them to protect themselves but also to be aware of friends who may be at risk. Ofsted will consider whether pupils feel safe and their ability to assess and manage risk appropriately and to keep themselves safe.

The key messages about healthy relationships can be taught to all ages using age and stage appropriate language to explore topics such as friendships, keeping safe, recognising and assessing risk and knowing how and where to get help when there are concerns. The [SEAL](#) materials have been positively regarded for some time in being a useful resource for covering these topics in primary schools.

In secondary schools, a wider range of topics relevant to the age and experiences of young people can be covered. These could include:

- Healthy relationships, respect and responsibilities.
- Raising awareness of unhealthy relationships, sexual exploitation and grooming.
- Understanding of dangerous and exploitative situations.
- Exploring gender stereotypes and gender roles.
- Increase awareness of risk, assessing risk and the consequences of risk taking, including sexual bullying and peer pressure.
- Building skills and confidence in developing positive, healthy relationships.

It is very important that the staff delivering the teaching feel well informed, confident in their subject knowledge and feel comfortable in teaching about a difficult issue. They also need to be familiar with the child protection policy and procedures in school and know how to report any child protection concerns.

Creating a safe learning environment:

As with all areas of sex and relationships education, young people need to feel safe and confident to fully participate in lessons and discussions. The following factors can help to create a safe learning environment:

- Agree ground rules with young people, including confidentiality. Confidentiality should be maintained in line with the school policy and the child protection policy.

- Model behaviour – be aware of values and attitudes, preconceptions and feelings. Be prepared to challenge any inappropriate language and attitudes including stereotyping. Recognise diversity within the teaching group and be aware of gender groupings. Consider whether mixed or separate gender groups are appropriate.
- Build trust – this sets the tone for lessons and helps to reinforce positive relationships.
- If using external teaching staff, ensure that school based staff are also involved in the lesson(s).

Working with parents:

Sharing concerns with parents may seem to be daunting expectation but schools are often the first agency to notice that a pupil may be at risk. Approaching parents to share concerns is something that schools need to feel confident about. School staff can be a source of support for parents who have concerns about their child's behaviour, appearance or friends who are not part of the school community. Schools can offer support to parents by listening to their concerns and working with them to access appropriate agencies for further advice and support.

Questions for schools when planning to teach about child sexual exploitation:

- Have you secured the support of senior management, parents, Governors and young people?
- Have you identified staff training needs to increase knowledge and develop confidence?
- Has the school explored working in partnership with the LSCB and other local specialist agencies?
- Are lessons integrated into the PSHE/SRE or other health and well-being programme in school?
- Is there sufficient time and resources to support the work?
- Have you planned how to create a safe learning environment?
- Have you prioritised topics in consultation with young people's learning needs?
- Are all staff clear about the child protection procedures in school and do you have plans in place to support young people who may disclose?

References:

Department for Education (2011) [Tackling child exploitation action plan.](#)

Home Office (2011) [Missing children and adults strategy](#)

London Safeguarding Children's Board (2006) [Safeguarding children abused through sexual exploitation.](#)