

What is child exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse where a person or group takes advantage of a power imbalance to entice, force, or coerce a child (under the age of 18) into sexual activity in exchange for something. Abuse can occur online or in person, as a one-off event or something that develops over time. It can also happen peer-on-peer.

Criminal exploitation of children (under 18 years) is when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive the child or vulnerable adult into criminal activity, for the financial or other advantage of the exploiter. County lines is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across Police and Local Authority boundaries. The 'County Line' is the mobile phone line used to take orders of drugs. A common feature in county lines drug supply is the exploitation of young and vulnerable people. The dealers will frequently target children and adults - to act as drug runners or move cash so they can stay under the radar of law enforcement. In some cases, dealers will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person, and use it to operate their criminal activity from. This is known as cuckooing.

Scotland's national review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation recognises that there is no universally agreed definition of group-based abuse and exploitation but has taken the definition from findings of a review in England and Wales as "multiple (i.e. two or more) individuals take advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, manipulate, or deceive a child into sexual and/or criminal activity."

What a child might say?	What might this mean?	What signs to look out for?
"It started with gifts... It was great because my parents could never afford to give me these things... I didn't realise they were slowly getting me to do things I wasn't comfortable with — it felt like I owed them, or I'd get in trouble if I didn't."	A young person may feel special because someone provides gifts, affection or status. They may not realise these acts are grooming tactics until control or coercion begins.	Unexplained gifts, money, clothes, alcohol, or new technology (these are grooming behaviours often used by perpetrators.)
"At first it started off with skipping one class, then two then full days... teachers didn't seem to notice or care, probably glad I wasn't there because I was always falling out with them or other kids."	Missing episodes may coincide with meeting individuals who are grooming or exploiting the child. Inconsistent explanations often signal that the child has been coached, is frightened, or feels unable to disclose where they were or who they were with. Repeated missing episodes often show the child is being pulled into situations where they are at heightened risk of harm, manipulation, or coercion. Children who are being groomed are often: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • moved around for exploitation. • isolated from safe adults. • emotionally manipulated into protecting their abuser. • given scripts or threatened to obscure the truth. 	Going missing from home, school, or care and returning with inconsistent explanations.
"I didn't know how to ask for help... I ended up speaking less and less to the people I should have been trusting — like my mum or a teacher."	Children often do not recognise grooming or exploitation until it has become harmful. They may appear 'secretive' when the reality is that they are scared and coping with trauma.	Increased secrecy, withdrawal from family, or disengagement from school.
"I thought they were my friends...at first it was amazing as I have never really had friends that liked hanging out with me before."	Children involved in sexual or criminal exploitation often describe being drawn in by belonging, protection, or excitement - only to become trapped by threats, debt, or fear.	New, older friends or relationships causing concern.
"At first it felt like someone finally understood me. I thought I could trust them because they were always there when I was upset... then it got scary really quickly."	A young person may feel there is a connection, they are cared about initially until it quickly becomes exploitation, sextortion and lead to the production of child sexual abuse material.	On-line grooming - gaming platforms, social media, instant messaging apps, photo sharing apps, live-streaming sites, messaging platforms, e-mail, on-line chat rooms etc.
		Signs of physical injury, fearfulness, or defensiveness.



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<p>“At first I thought it all made me feel more confident, then I realised things were not right, I became even more quiet than I used to be before it all started. I was really scared.”</p>	<p>Children who are being groomed or exploited often experience new fears, anxiety, or withdrawal. They may become unusually quiet, jumpy, or distressed because they are being threatened, manipulated, or feel ashamed.</p> <p>Heightened aggression or irritability - a child may lash out due to stress, confusion, or pressure from exploiters. Loss of interest in school or activities - Exploiters often isolate children from positive influences or demand secrecy, causing disengagement.</p> <p>Changes in style, appearance, or peer group – sudden shifts may reflect influence or control from someone new in their life.</p> <p>Secretive behaviour - a child may hide their phone, delete messages, or become defensive when asked simple questions.</p>	<p>Sudden changes in behaviour, mental health difficulties, anxiety or low mood.</p>
<p>“There were always loads of other kids there too – it was a public place with loads of people walking by all the time - I didn’t think it was unsafe.”</p>	<p>There are often common ‘hot spot’ areas in plain sight and behind closed doors where young people are frequently targeted, approached, groomed, or moved. Fast-food outlets, shops/shopping centres, parks, High Street shops, train/bus stations, budget hotels and B&Bs etc. There can also be on-line hotspots - gaming platforms, social media, live-streaming sites etc. Both public or online spaces can be used to make initial contact, groom in plain sight, move and control.</p>	<p>Association with known ‘hotspots’ where exploitation could happen - public spaces, transport hubs, behind closed-doors and on-line.</p>
<p>“I didn’t want to get anyone in trouble...especially when it was me that was doing the bad things. I was worried I would get into trouble.”</p>	<p>Fear, shame, and manipulation can silence children. They may worry they will be blamed or punished, especially in cases linked to sexual exploitation.</p>	<p>Reluctance to disclose information or fear of getting into trouble.</p>
<p>“They were in the same year as me... I thought they liked me but it was all a big joke. I didn’t know they were just using me.”</p>	<p>Children can be sexually exploited by peers known to them at school, in the neighbourhood or through mutual friends.</p> <p>The abuser is the same age, or close in age - at the very least, everyone directly involved in the abuse is under 18.</p> <p>Peer victimisation represents around a third of known cases of adolescent harmful sexual behaviour.</p> <p>In peer-on-peer exploitation, schools and youth clubs are also locations where children and young people can be exploited in addition to many of the warning signs/indicators of CSE relating to adult perpetrators.</p> <p>Gang exploitation may feature in relation to peer-on peer-sexual abuse.</p>	<p>Peer-on-peer sexual exploitation.</p>

Who is most at risk?

Exploitation can affect *any* child regardless of background, circumstances, or identity; however, research tells us that some young people face higher vulnerability to exploitation due to factors in their lives, relationships, or environments. Vulnerability is not the reason, but unmet need and inadequate protective structures provide the opportunities for exploitation to happen. Research tells us that risk increases where the following factors or experiences are present in a child's life:

- Learning disability.
- Looked After and Accommodated.
- Disengagement from school.
- Family breakdown.
- Substance use.
- Bereavement and loss of a significant care giver.
- History of sexual abuse and neglect.
- Lack of parental supervision and guidance.
- Episodes of going missing.
- Poor health and/or wellbeing.

Who are the perpetrators?

Research into child exploitation shows that there is no one type of abuser. Perpetrators of child exploitation can be male or female, come from any ethnic background and be any age. They may have a low social and/or economic status, or they could be a wealthy individual in a considerable position of authority.

A perpetrator may act alone or operate as part of a group. Exploitation can involve opportunistic or organised networks of perpetrators who may profit financially from trafficking children between different locations to engage in sexual activity often with multiple men. The perpetrators may have different motivations and tactics. They often seek to exert power, control and manipulate vulnerable children for their own sexual gratification, exploitation or gain. The motivations behind these crimes can vary, but they may involve deep-seated psychological issues or a desire for dominance, often showing a lack of empathy for the victim. Many perpetrators groom their victims by gaining their trust, creating an emotional bond, and gradually introducing inappropriate behaviours.

How should all agencies respond?

- Act immediately if you suspect a child is at risk or has been harmed. Always report concerns, take appropriate advice and discuss your concerns with your line manager. act without delay and do not be afraid to escalate concerns.
- Follow the [Edinburgh and the Lothians Multi-agency Child Protection Procedures](#) and ensure timely referral to Social Work or Police Scotland.
- Do not blame the child. Exploitation is never the child's responsibility. Language must be non-judgmental and focused on protection.
- Relationships are key. Having an empathic, consistent and positive relationship with a child is paramount. Young people will not disclose exploitation and abuse quickly; they need to have a trusting relationship before this can happen. The focus should be on what we can do to increase the safety of young people.
- Be professionally curious with the child, parents and other professionals. Child exploitation often hides in plain sight when behaviour appears age-appropriate and explanations feel plausible. Be respectfully persistent, curiosity is not confrontational and must always feel safe for the child. Triangulate the information with other agencies/people? How might loyalty, fear or control influence what information the young person shares and to whom? Who is the young person spending time with? Where are they going? What does their on-line life look like? Have they any new online friends? Is there a change in behaviour? What are the patterns over time?
- Be aware of language - avoid judgements like 'in a relationship', 'promiscuous', 'risky choice', 'putting themselves at risk', 'sharing indecent images', 'putting themselves at risk', 'displaying harmful sexual behaviour'.
- Start to build a picture of the child's experiences - use chronologies to explore any patterns of behaviours, incidents or disclosures as well as any gaps in information.
- Record factual observations, not assumptions, to support multi-agency action.
- Use appropriate screening tools for sexual or criminal exploitation where available. Refer to [Local Guidance](#) and [Scotland's Criminal Exploitation Framework for Practice](#).
- Consider a [contextual safeguarding](#) approach - risks may arise in peer groups, online spaces, schools or community environments.

Helpful resources

The Criminal Exploitation of Children – Scotland’s Framework for Practice	Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice.
Scottish Government – Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Policy Guidance	Definitions, reporting, and multi-agency duties.
National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland	Roles, responsibilities, and standards for all practitioners.
CELCIS Analysis of CSE 2024	Evidence on prevalence, harms, and best practice.
NWG Network NWG - help for parents and carers	Public Resources: Toolkits, posters, training materials and information for all professionals.
National Crime Agency	The National Crime Agency leads the UK’s fight to cut serious and organised crime, protecting the public by targeting and pursuing those criminals who pose the greatest risk to the UK.
National Crime Agency County Lines	Information about county lines and advice to protect and help children and young people.
NSPCC child sexual exploitation	Information about child sexual exploitation and advice to protect and help children and young people.
NSPCC criminal exploitation and gangs	Advice about how to spot the signs of criminal exploitation and involvement in gangs and what support is available for children and young people.
The Children’s Society	Exploitation Resources: Guides for professionals, parents, and translated materials.
Parent Club – Reporting concerns about child sexual abuse and exploitation	Information and advice for parents and carers.
Contextual Safeguarding	The Global Centre for Contextual Safeguarding has information about this approach to understanding and responding to young people’s experiences of significant harm beyond their families.