



Department  
for Education

## What to do if you suspect a child is being sexually exploited

### A step-by-step guide for frontline practitioners

1. This step-by-step guide complements, and should be read in conjunction with, the *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation*<sup>1</sup> statutory guidance published in 2009. It is intended for frontline practitioners in the statutory and voluntary and community sectors (VCS). It outlines the actions they should take, as a minimum, if they suspect that a child they are in contact with is being sexually exploited.
2. Child sexual exploitation is a form of child abuse which involves children and young people (male and female, of a range of ethnic origins and ages, in some cases as young as 10) receiving something in exchange for sexual activity. Perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are found in all parts of the country and are not restricted to particular ethnic groups.
3. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) are responsible for ensuring that appropriate local procedures are in place to tackle child sexual exploitation. All frontline practitioners need to be aware of those procedures (including ones for early help) and how they relate to their own areas of responsibility. LSCBs and frontline practitioners should ensure that actions to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people who are sexually exploited focus on the needs of the child.

### Step 1: Identifying cases

4. Frontline practitioners from voluntary and statutory sector organisations (including, for example, health and education) should be aware of the key indicators<sup>2</sup> of children being sexually exploited which can include:
  - going missing for periods of time or regularly coming home late;
  - regularly missing school or education or not taking part in education;

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<sup>1</sup> *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation* statutory guidance  
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00689-2009>

<sup>2</sup> This checklist, which is not intended to be comprehensive, is based on advice to parents and carers published by Barnardo's in August 2011: <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cutthemfree/spotthesigns>.

- appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions;
- associating with other young people involved in exploitation;
- having older boyfriends or girlfriends;
- suffering from sexually transmitted infections;
- mood swings or changes in emotional wellbeing;
- drug and alcohol misuse; and
- displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour.

Practitioners should also be aware that many children and young people who are victims of sexual exploitation do not recognise themselves as such.

5. A significant number of children who are victims of sexual exploitation go missing from home, care and education at some point. Return interviews for young runaways can help in establishing why a young person ran away and the subsequent support that may be required, as well as preventing repeat incidents. The information gathered from return interviews can be used to inform the identification, referral and assessment of any child sexual exploitation cases.

6. In assessing whether a child or young person is a victim of sexual exploitation, or at risk of becoming a victim, careful consideration should be given to the issue of consent. 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 also 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; and
- if the victim is incapacitated through drink or drugs, or the victim or his or her family has been subject to violence or the threat of it, they cannot be considered to have given true consent and therefore offences may have been committed.

Child sexual exploitation is therefore potentially a child protection issue for all children under the age of 18 years and not just those in a specific age group.

## **Step 2: Referring cases**

7. Where child sexual exploitation, or the risk of it, is suspected, frontline practitioners should discuss the case with a manager or the designated member of staff for child protection. If after discussion there remain concerns, local safeguarding procedures should be triggered, including referral to local authority (LA) children's social care and the police, regardless of whether the victim is engaging with services or not.

### Step 3: Assessment

8. On receipt of a referral to LA children's social care, a qualified social worker should discuss the case with other services and professionals that they consider relevant and decide on a course of action within one working day of the referral. Where there is a risk to the life of a child or a likelihood of serious immediate harm, an agency with statutory child protection powers must act quickly to secure the immediate safety of the child.

9. An assessment under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 must be undertaken in all cases where child sexual exploitation, or the likelihood of it, is suspected. The local authority, health and other partners must follow the process set out in the *Framework for assessment of children in need and their families*<sup>3</sup>. The assessment is not an end or a process in itself, but the means of informing the planning and delivery of effective services for children. The need to make timely, proportionate assessments to understand a child's needs and circumstances is critical to secure good outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people. The assessment should contain a conclusion as to whether the child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

10. If a section 17 enquiry shows that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the social worker should hold a strategy discussion involving the police, health and other relevant statutory and VCS organisations to consider whether a section 47 enquiry is required. If the decision is taken to initiate a section 47 enquiry, the social worker should convene a child protection conference.

11. The child or young person's wishes and feelings should be considered when determining what services to provide and before making decisions about action to be taken to protect individual children.

12. Where the child or young person is not deemed to be in need, the social worker must consider onward referral to agencies who provide services for children and young people with additional needs (for example, a VCS or health organisation; see Step 4 below).

### Step 4: Supporting victims out of CSE and in recovery

13. Statutory agencies and voluntary sector organisations should reach agreement on the services to be provided to the child or young person and on how they will be co-ordinated. The types of intervention offered should be appropriate to the needs of the child or young person. They should take full account of both the identified risk factors and the child or young person's family and wider circumstances. The latter might, for example, include previous abuse, running away from home or care, involvement in gangs

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<sup>3</sup> The Framework for assessment of children in need and their families can be found on the Department of Health website

A draft revised framework was published for consultation on 12 June 2012. The final version will be published on the Department for Education website following the consultation.

and groups and/or child trafficking. The health services provided might include sexual health services and mental health services or counselling.

14. Because the effects of child sexual exploitation can last well into adulthood, such support may be needed over a long period of time. For this reason, effective links should be made between children and adult services and between statutory and VCS organisations.

15. Consideration should also be given to supporting the families of victims, including through the work of organisations like the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping.

### **Step 5: Identifying and prosecuting perpetrators**

16. The police and criminal justice agencies lead on the identification and prosecution of perpetrators. All frontline practitioners involved with victims of child sexual exploitation should continually gather, record and share information with the police as soon as practicable, including data on running or missing episodes.

### **Step 6: Ensuring child victims are supported through related legal proceedings**

17. Child victims should be supported throughout the prosecution process and beyond, including through the use of special measures where appropriate<sup>4</sup>. Independent Sexual Violence Advisers<sup>5</sup> or specialist VCS services, where available, may also have an important role to play.

### **Further information**

18. Further information on child sexual exploitation can be found on the Department for Education website<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Victims and Witnesses section of the Crown Prosecution Service website: [www.cps.gov.uk](http://www.cps.gov.uk).

<sup>5</sup> Further information on Independent Sexual Violence Advisers can be found at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime/violence-against-women-girls/sexual-violence/isva/>

<sup>6</sup> Further information on child sexual exploitation can be found at: [www.education.gov.uk/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation](http://www.education.gov.uk/tackling-child-sexual-exploitation)