

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. CCE does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Criminal exploitation includes county lines but also includes children coerced or manipulated into criminal activity. Initial contact can be made via social media and victims can be groomed similarly to sexual exploitation. Young people can be criminally exploited by an adult or a peer. The relationship is an unequal power imbalance that involves an exchange for tangible rewards (money, drugs or clothes etc.) or intangible rewards (status, protection or perceived friendship). CCE can include children being forced to work in cannabis factories, being coerced into moving drugs or money across the country (County Lines), forced to shoplift or pickpocket, or to threaten other young people.

15-16 years is the most common age range for young people being criminally exploited but this can include young children, this can also affect males and females. Children who are not in regular school or are missing from education are considered to be at increased risk of criminal exploitation.

Children are often groomed or tricked into criminal activity before they realise the dangers. Children can carry drugs in harmful ways, such as ‘plugging’ (drugs inserted into their rectum or vagina). This is one example of how criminal and sexual exploitation can overlap. Another example is the use of sexual violence which is used as punishment.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse that affects thousands of children and young people every year in the UK, when young people under 18 receive ‘something’ (food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) in exchange for performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. It can happen to any young person from any background and affects boys and young men as well as girls and young women.

In Essex, the definition of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) from the Department of Education (DfE, 2017) has been adopted:

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

CSE can occur through the use of technology without the child’s immediate recognition, for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no immediate payment or gain. In all cases those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and /or economic or other resources.

There are three important and recognisable elements of child sexual exploitation:

- Children are ‘groomed’ and there is power and control held by the perpetrator/s
- An ‘exchange’ (such as gift, food, money, drugs etc.) is present, this could be to a third party and not always to the child themselves
- Sexual acts or the exchange of sexual images is present

Impact

Sexual exploitation can seriously affect a victim’s life into adulthood. Victims may also suffer sexual and reproductive health problems as a result of the exploitation they have suffered. Even when children or young people appear to have recovered or overcome the psychological, physical and emotional effects suffered from the sexual exploitation, they may still be unable to stay in the area where they live if it has associations with the abuse against them. As with CCE, victims are not always recognised and can be criminalized for actions they take whilst under coercion. This remains a significant concern, as professionals continue to encounter cases where children are manipulated, groomed and exploited without fully understanding the abuse they are experiencing.

Types of sexual exploitation

The sexual exploitation of children and young people can be seen in varied forms which can be described through understanding models of CSE. It is important to recognise that these models do not necessarily work in isolation and various models can be operating concurrently.

Inappropriate relationship model

This usually involves one perpetrator who has inappropriate power or control over a young person, such as being physically older, stronger or wealthier or in a position of power e.g. teacher or community leader. This person will be having some form of a sexual relationship with the young person. This can include familial abuse where a family member is exploiting their child, sibling for some ‘gain’, including third party gain. The abuser may also be vulnerable due to mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency or a previous, and/or current, experience of exploitation themselves.

Organised/networking and trafficking model

This model includes the sex trafficking of children and young people across international borders as well as across internal borders, it can include the moving of children and young people between houses or hotels within the same town/district, for the purposes of passing children and young people to and amongst one or more sexual perpetrators. This includes larger networks of organised crime with the purposes of ‘selling’ children and young people. Young people themselves can be exploited into ‘recruitment’ of other children and young people, including for the purposes of ‘sex parties’ arranged by the perpetrators. Such parties offer substances and alcohol to young people, and may involve web cams to record and stream sexual acts. Young people may be manipulated and blackmailed through indecent images obtained or allegations of a drug debt following the party, this can also be found in the gangs and peer on peer models.

Gangs and Group model

Sexual exploitation can occur through gangs and groups; this can be through gang initiation rituals, threats of violence and bullying, or as a punishment for crossing gang areas for example. Females can be found to be exploited through ‘honey trapping’, whereby a woman is tasked to infiltrate another gang through sexual advances. Young males may be forced to have sex with older women or women of similar ages in order to prove masculinity or with adult males as a form of punishment. Both genders may drug run for the gang and this can involve ‘plugging’ where by substances are transported in their anus. It has been found that the retrieval of substances can be sexually humiliating. Young people can themselves be exploited into recruiting other young people into gangs, exposing others to risks of gang violence and sexual exploitation.

Peer on Peer model

Sexual exploitation can happen amongst young people of a similar age, and is often referred to as ‘sexual bullying’ (Children’s Society, 2015). Some young people will befriend other young people and make them believe they are in a loving ‘relationship’ or ‘friendship’, they are then coerced into having sex with friends or associates. Peer on peer model can sometimes be related to ‘gangs and group activity’. Peer on peer sexual exploitation can include the abuse happening in public, by one or more perpetrators, and/or be filmed and distributed. In all cases of peer on peer exploitation, a power imbalance will still inform the relationship, but this might not necessarily be through an age gap between the abuser and the abused.

Older “boyfriend/girlfriend” model

Often referred to as the ‘Boyfriend’ Model, this model involves the befriending and grooming of a child or young person by an older adult. This grooming process often revolves around the child and young person’s vulnerabilities and building the child or young person to believe that they are in a loving relationship. The young person may then be passed to other known adults to the ‘boyfriend’/ ‘girlfriend’ merging into the gang or organised network models.

Online grooming model

Children and young people are subject to many risks when they are accessing on-line activities and this includes the risk of sexual exploitation. This can include adults and peers deceiving and exploiting children and young people into producing sexual images of themselves, engaging in sexual chat online or sexual activity over a webcam. Children and young people can be groomed on-line by sexual perpetrators and manipulated and coerced to meet up secretly, or images can be screen-shot and saved to blackmail young people, which can be frightening and intimidating.

Who is more vulnerable to becoming a victim?

Any young person regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality can be at risk of being sexually exploited. However, there are a number of factors that can increase a young person’s vulnerability. These include

- Having a prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse;
- Lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example);
- Recent bereavement or loss;
- Social isolation or social difficulties;
- Absence of a safe environment to explore sexuality;
- Economic vulnerability;
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation status;
- Connections with other children and young people who are being sexually exploited;
- Family members or other connections involved in adult sex work;

- Having a physical or learning disability;
- Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories); and
- Sexual identity.

Know the Signs

Children and young people who are victims of sexual exploitation often do not recognise they are being exploited. However, there are a number of signs that could indicate a child is being groomed.

Emotional and behavioural development

- Changes in temperament or suffering from depression, mood swings or changes in emotional wellbeing.
- Secretive behaviour, concealing their use of the internet and phones.
- Association with other young people involved in exploitation and having older boyfriends/girlfriends.
- Getting involved in petty crime such as shoplifting or stealing.
- Being absent and truanting, lack of interest and frequent poor behaviour.
- Considerable change in performance.

Identity

- Appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions, which could include multiple phones, unexplained keys, sim cards, possession of hotel keys or keys to unknown premises.
- Change in appearance.

Family and social relationships

- Children or young people who become estranged from their family.
- Sudden hostility towards family members.
- Becoming physically aggressive towards family and friends.
- Going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late.
- Involvement in exploitative relationships or association with risky adults.
- Children who have older boyfriends or girlfriends.
- Young people being found in towns or districts where they have no known connection.
- Young people who have more than one boyfriend or who share their boyfriend.
- Children or young people seen entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults.
- Becoming detached from age-related activities and social groups.
- Being sexually active.
- Receiving phone calls and/or text messages from unknown adults.
- Children or young people who appear to be recruiting others into exploitative situations.

Health

- Evidence of drug, alcohol and/or substance use. Abusers may use drugs and alcohol to help control children and young people.
- Unexplained physical injuries; for example, bruising suggestive of either physical or sexual assault.
- Children or young people who are self-harming and demonstrating suicidal thoughts and tendencies.
- Recurring sexually-transmitted infections.
- Pregnancy or seeking an abortion.
- Displaying sexual behaviours beyond expected sexual development, such as being over familiar with strangers or sending sexual images via the internet or mobile phones.

Essex Risk in the Community and the Role of Criminal Exploitation Champions

Risk in the Community is the Essex partnership approach which weaves through and across the workforce. This includes a strategic focus on tackling exploitation from the ESCB Child Exploitation & Missing Sub-Committee, which has governance over the four MACE (Multi-Agency Child Exploitation) partnership meetings in Essex.

The approach also includes:

- RIC pathway and RIC meetings which develop partnership plans to reduce harm from exploitation for children open to Social Care.
- District level community meetings which focus on increasing community safety and reducing exploitation harm that link to MACE.
- Partnership awareness raising campaigns that take place regularly, such as [Online Safety](#), [Operation Henderson](#) and [Operation Make Safe](#) where partners unite to prevent harm and communicate how the community can seek support.
- A common language and application of assessing risk levels, plus key networks such as the Child Exploitation Champions - approximately 250 professionals from across the partnership in Essex who join together to tackle exploitation.

As part of Southend, Essex and Thurrock’s approach to tackling CSE, the concept of CSE Champions was introduced in 2013. An ESCB-led review the CSE Champion role now includes all forms of exploitation. Further information and details of how to become a Criminal Exploitation Champion is available on the [ESCB website](#).

Each CE Champion is a key contact for staff within their organisation/department to go to for support and advice in relation to child exploitation. They are a conduit between their organisation and ESCB by sharing updates, resources and examples of good practice. They raise awareness, disseminate resources and information in relation to child exploitation within their organisation. CE Champions are nominated by their organisation and have a good working knowledge of safeguarding children, have completed the SET exploitation e-learning package and are provided with NWG Membership. The role was updated in 2020 and widened to include all forms of exploitation.

The CE Champion in our school is

Additional guidance and further reading

- Keeping Children Safe in Education 2026
- Child Sexual Exploitation guidance for practitioners DfE February 2017
- Working Together to Safeguard Children February 2024
- [NSPCC statistics](#)
- Essex “I didn’t know” campaign
<http://www.knowandsee.co.uk/>
- ESCB information about CCE
<https://www.escb.co.uk/working-with-children/risk-in-the-community-ric/what-is-exploitation/criminal-exploitation/>
- Child Exploitation Champions – [ESCB risk in the community information](#)