Child Sexual Exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of sexual abuse that involves the manipulation and/or coercion of young people under the age of 18 into sexual activity in exchange for things such as money, gifts, accommodation, affection or status.

The manipulation or ‘grooming’ process involves befriending children, gaining their trust, and often providing them with gifts/drugs and/or alcohol, sometimes over a long period of time, before the abuse begins. The abusive relationship between victim and perpetrator involves an imbalance of power which limits the victim’s options. It is a form of abuse which is often misunderstood by victims and outsiders as consensual.

Child sexual exploitation can manifest itself in different ways. It can involve an older perpetrator exercising financial, emotional or physical control over a young person. It can involve peers manipulating or forcing victims into sexual activity, sometimes within gangs and in gang-affected neighbourhoods. Exploitation can also involve opportunistic or organised networks of perpetrators who may profit financially from trafficking young victims or recording abuse and sharing it on the internet. (Barnardo’s, 2011).

Technology is widely used by perpetrators as a method of grooming and coercing victims, often through social networking sites and mobile devices (Jago et al, 2011). This form of abuse usually occurs in private, or in semi-public places such as parks, cinemas, cafes and hotels. Children and young people are often abused by people they know or feel they have a relationship with.

The number of children on a CSE Plan has increased in Cheshire East since 2012-13. This is thought to be due to increased awareness of CSE by relevant agencies following recent CSE training programmes.

The best way to tackle and eventually reduce CSE is to increase public awareness. The Cheshire East Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) launched the start of a publicity campaign on CSE in January 2014 aimed at communities, professionals, volunteers and children and young people. It is anticipated that the number of CSE plans will rise as a result of this campaign but it is difficult to estimate to what the full extent or what the incidence of CSE is within Cheshire East. There is a also an established pathway for agencies to share information to act to prevent CSE where it is suspected.

It is not possible to say exactly how many young people are victims of child sexual exploitation for a number of reasons. It is described as a ‘hidden’ form of abuse which leaves victims confused, frightened and reluctant to make any disclosures. Some young people are not even aware they are experiencing abuse as the perpetrator has manipulated them into believing they are in a loving relationship, or that they are dependent on their abuser for protection (Sharp, N., 2011; Cockbain, E. and Brayley, H., 2012; Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), 2011).

Related JSNA sections:
- Safeguarding children and young people
- Substance misuse
- Domestic violence
- Under 18 conceptions
- Early help

Because of the grooming methods used by their abusers, it is very common for children and young people who are sexually exploited not to recognise that they are being abused. It becomes difficult for them to acknowledge and talk about what is happening to them and their needs can be overlooked. This can happen to any child or young person, but children and young people who are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation are those with/who:
- a history of going missing
- Parental substance misuse, domestic violence and parental mental health issues
- Recent bereavement or loss
- Links to gangs
- Associate with, or are groomed by other young people who are sexually exploited
- Special needs
- Homeless
- Low self esteem
- Disengaged from education
- Misuse substances
- Are not on public records (Berelowitz et al, 2012)