

Child exploitation and children living in residential child care

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Find out more about child exploitation and what you need to do if you think it's happening to a child

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

CSE is a specific type of sexual abuse. One or more people will groom a child and offer gifts, money and affection to perform sexual acts on one or more people. Drugs and alcohol are usually involved. It can be gang-related and crime-related and can target girls or boys.

CSE can take place online; children don't have to meet face-to-face with abusers to be exploited by being asked to send sexual images, for instance. Approximately 2,400 children are exploited online every year in the UK.

[CEOP, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command, has advice about online for professionals as well as young people and their families](#)

Children can be very young when the grooming starts (we have heard of children as young as 11, but this changes all the time). Children may think they've consented to this type of activity, which is why it's called exploitation. It's important to remember this is abuse, even if the child you're looking after seems to be 'agreeing' to it, or actively seeking out the abusers.

In the UK the age of consent for a sexual relationship is 16 years old. However, sexual relationships are not necessarily consensual just because the young person is over 16. CSE often involves deliberate intoxication or drug use, intimidation and actual violence. Physical and psychological control or abuse is never consensual, regardless of the age of the young person.

[Consent – it's as simple as tea](#). This video explains in an easily-relatable way how simple it is to decide if you're consenting or not to an activity.

[Childline's YouTube channel has a number of videos of young people explaining consent](#)

Factors that make young people vulnerable to CSE

We know that young people living in residential child care are particularly vulnerable to CSE for some of the reasons below:

- they're vulnerable and isolated from a stable family
- they may have been sexually abused in the past
- they may have a strong desire to fit in with a group.

You need to be aware of the history of the children you care for. Ask your manager and the child's social worker if they're particularly vulnerable to CSE and how you can help protect them from this type of abuse.

Warning signs of CSE

The following are warning signs of CSE you should look out for:

- changes in behaviour
- receiving clothes, trainers or mobile phones from an unknown source
- having money or new belongings without receipts that they cannot explain
- responding to phone calls and going out unexpectedly

- unknown cars pulling up outside the home on a regular basis
- wearing hair, clothes or make-up intended to make them look older
- using sexual words that aren't appropriate for their age and that you wouldn't expect them to know
- having marks (including love bites) on them that they don't explain
- having an older 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'.

You should also be aware of the following warning signs:

- going missing
- staying out late
- coming home under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

Educating young people about CSE

You need to educate children and young people about CSE, including:

- ways of keeping safe online and offline
- how they could be groomed
- making sense what happened if things go wrong
- healthy coping skills (such as talking to trusted people, exercising, cooking, or learning a new hobby) rather than unhealthy coping (for instance [using substances](#), [overeating](#), or [taking risks](#)).

The more they know, the easier it will be for them to recognise the warning signs and pass on that information to you or other professionals.

It's vitally important to always notify your manager, the Police or social services if you have any concerns around CSE. Don't assume the 'thresholds' are too low or there isn't enough proof.

Criminal exploitation and ‘county lines’

‘County lines’ is where gangs from outside the local area ‘recruit’ vulnerable young people to work for them. The recruits are usually boys and can be very young (we have heard of 11 or 12 year olds). The gangs come from urban areas like Birmingham, Liverpool and London and the term ‘county lines’ relates to the phone lines they use to extend their drugs operations across the UK.

Initially these children undertake tasks such as hiding money or guns. The gang then train them to become ‘runners’. This means delivering drugs and collecting cash on behalf of the dealers. Children are useful to dealers because:

- they are vulnerable to exploitation
- if they get caught, they often get lesser sentences than adults.

To ensure the young person continues to work for them, the gangs use intimidation and bullying tactics towards the young people or make threats to hurt their family. The young person may disappear for days on end. The gangs give the runners increasingly more difficult and dangerous ‘initiation’ tasks to test their loyalty. These may include committing or experiencing violence or abuse, as well as drug running.

County lines exploitation is happening in Wales.

[South Wales Police information about county lines](#)

Factors that make young people vulnerable to ‘county lines’

Like CSE, county lines involves grooming and control. And like CSE, organised crime groups will target young people living in residential care for county lines exploitation. This is because the gang sees them as:

- isolated from family and friends
- not living in a stable home
- likely to have already experienced neglect and abuse
- economically vulnerable.

As well as using gifts, money, intimidation and violence, gangs manipulate the fact that young people living in residential care often desire protection, status, affection or friendship.

Like CSE, you should recognise that 'county lines' is exploitation, even if the young person believes it's consensual.

Warning signs of 'county lines'

Warning signs you should look out for that a young person might be involved in 'county lines' include:

- coming home late, staying out all night or going missing
- being found in areas away from home
- increasing drug use or being found with large amounts of drugs
- being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going
- unexplained absences from school, college, training or work
- unexplained money, phone(s), clothes or jewellery
- increasingly disruptive or aggressive behaviour

- using sexual, drug-related or violent language you wouldn't expect them to know
- coming home with injuries or looking particularly dishevelled
- having hotel cards or keys to unknown places.

You must follow your organisation's safeguarding policy by telling your manager, Police or social services if you think one of your young people is involved in county lines. They are at risk of serious criminal charges and the dangers of being involved in violent organised crime.

Commonly used terms in drug dealing and 'county lines'

The following terms are used in drug dealing and 'county lines' exploitation:

'Cuckooing': a drug gang takes over the home of a young person and their family by using intimidation and violence.

'Going county': describes the county lines activity: a person travelling to and from places delivering drugs or money.

'Trapping': the act of selling drugs.

'Trap house': building or base where drugs are sold and sometimes manufactured. The young person is forced to stay and work here.

'Trap line': mobile phone used specifically for running and selling drugs.

Case study

[Read the story of how 15 year old Huda got involved in county lines.](#)

Useful resources about CSE

The NSPCC helpline provides help and support: 0808 800 5000.

The Childline service can support young people with whatever problems or dangers they're facing any time of the day or night: 0800 1111.

[There are a number of videos about face-to-face and online grooming on Childline's YouTube channel](#)

[Barnardos has information about CSE](#)

[Child Sexual Exploitation: Problems and Solutions from the perspectives of young people and professionals](#)

[Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse](#)

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

Useful resources about county lines

[The Children's Society has resources about county lines](#)

[Stop & Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation \(SPACE\)](#)

[Crossing the Line - Britain's Teenage Drug Mules. A documentary you can listen to about county lines](#)

[Volteface also has videos about county lines exploitation](#)

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).