

‘It’s not on the radar’

The hidden diversity of children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation in England¹

– Barnardos – March 2016 - Executive summary

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) can affect all children – including those with disabilities – regardless of gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, faith or economic background. Nevertheless, public and professional perception often stereotypes victims of CSE as white girls from disadvantaged backgrounds who are assumed to be heterosexual. While some victims and children at risk do meet this description, assumptions can prevent the identification of other children who do not fit the stereotype.

Understanding CSE and the different methods that perpetrators use to exploit must be considered in parallel with the fact that children are not defined by one aspect of their identity. A victim of sexual exploitation may have multiple identities and, for example, be male, gay, come from a faith group that does not tolerate homosexuality and have a disability. What makes a young person vulnerable to sexual exploitation is very individual, and while an identity alone may not result in vulnerability, all aspects of a child’s identity must be considered when identifying and raising awareness of CSE.

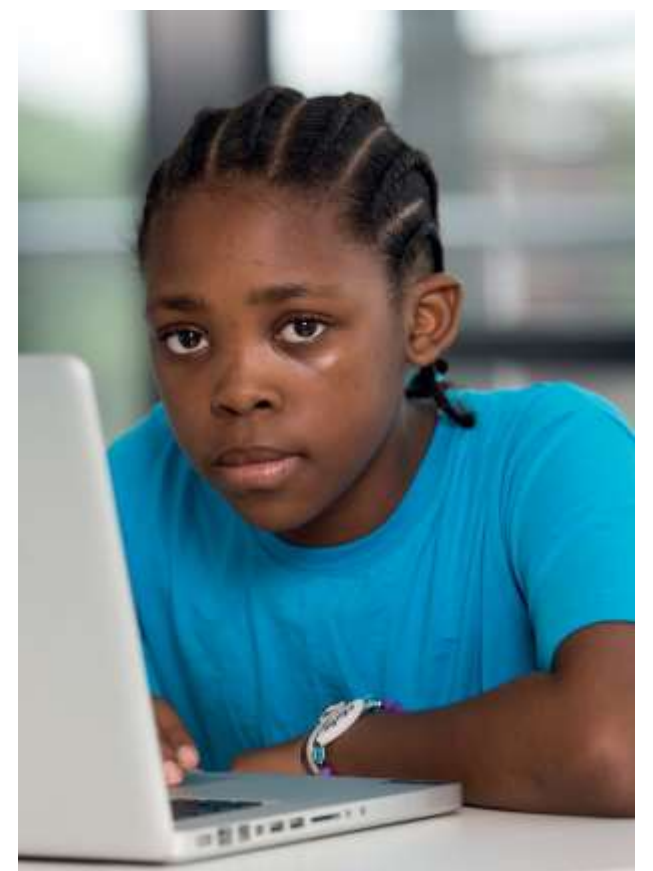
Due to the complex identities of individuals, there are many themes that cut across all four areas. For example, the following are a number of factors that are relevant to particular ‘groups’ of children and young people addressed in this report:

- A young person’s chronological age may be different from their developmental age, or apparently at odds with their experience of relationships, for example if they have a learning disability or come out as LGBT in their late teens or early twenties.
- Young people and professionals may normalise abuse experienced through CSE, either because of lack of knowledge about CSE or because it is viewed as ‘normal’ for, or by, the network or group the young person has been exploited in.
- The lack of sex and relationships education affects all young people, regardless of their identity, although some children – such as those with learning disabilities or those who are LGBTQ – are less likely to receive any, or relevant, sex and relationships education.

Key findings

Boys and young men:

- Societal values regarding masculinity and perceptions of males as perpetrators are seen to mask the fact that boys and young men can be victims too.
- Males seem to find it particularly hard to disclose abuse.
- Fear of being labelled gay, particularly in communities where there is homophobia, can prevent disclosure.
- There is too little recognition of the fact that a male can be both a victim and a perpetrator.
- Boys can be sexually exploited by peers, particularly in gang situations.
- Research has found that male and female CSE victims share certain common traits but also exhibit significant differences in terms of, for example, disability and youth offending rates².
- It might be assumed that young men engaging in sex are doing so because they are highly sexualised, gay or bisexual, and not because they are being exploited.



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https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjG99Gfu7nQAhWiCMAKHcMqAyEQFggrMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.barnardos.org.uk%2Fits-not-on-the-radar-report.pdf&usg=AFQjCNHkixQ_YupBCOxxDCEIfRqVtAEwug

² Cockbain, E; Brayley, H; Ashby, M (2014) *Not just a girl thing: A large-scale comparison of male and female users of child sexual exploitation services in the UK.*

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and questioning (LGBTQ) young people:

- LGBTQ young people may feel isolated and believe there will be a lack of acceptance by other people regarding their sexuality and gender identity. They may seek support via adult-orientated groups, online or, in the case of boys and young men, in public sex environments such as 'cottages' or 'cruising grounds'.
- There is little in the way of educational resources or general information that provides advice to LGBTQ young people about what a healthy relationship is.
- Societal attitudes towards sexual relationships among lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people can result in unhealthy or unsafe sexual relationships being accepted as 'normal'.
- Professionals should only share information about a young person's sexuality and gender identity if the young person has agreed that they can do this. Agreement should also be reached on those individuals with whom this information may be shared.
- Possible sexual exploitation in lesbian and trans relationships should be given equal consideration as sexual exploitation within male gay relationships.
- LGBT communities might be reluctant to talk about or acknowledge CSE for fear of exacerbating homo/bi/transphobia.

Ethnicity and faith:

- Community and faith groups are not homogenous and there can be a diversity of cultural and religious practices within communities.
- Victims of sexual exploitation come from all ethnic backgrounds, regardless of how conservative or 'protected' children may appear.
- Cultural and religious views and practices, particularly those that prize a female's virginity or a male's heterosexuality, may prevent victims from speaking out due to a fear of retribution or rejection from families.
- Access to communities should be via a broad range of stakeholders, rather than solely through male religious leaders, and particularly through those with child-centred perspectives.
- Working with groups that are committed to child protection and to opposing violence and abuse, such as women's organisations and others not often associated with CSE, could enable better identification of victims.

Disabilities:

- Children and young people with a disability are three times more likely to be abused than children without a disability³. Within this group, children with behaviour or conduct disorders are particularly vulnerable.
- Children and young people with disabilities are often over-protected and not informed about sex and relationships.
- The transition from children's services into independent living is a particularly vulnerable time for young people with disabilities.
- Learning difficulties or delayed development may be a consequence of trauma or sexual abuse.
- A lack of diagnosis and assessment for learning disabilities can result in a child's behaviour being misunderstood, and exclusion from school. This can lead to the child being vulnerable to CSE.



The true scale of sexual exploitation is unknown, and it is recognised that that while not all children and young people will be victims, all must be given the confidence and resilience to identify risky relationships and develop healthy ones. No child is ever to blame for their abuse, regardless of their actions, and adults must be aware of the issue and confident to identify and respond, regardless of the sexuality and gender identity, ethnicity, faith or disability of the child concerned.

Message from the Local Safeguarding Children Boards

This research highlights the need for consideration of the multiple identities some children will experience and how vulnerability to CSE is very individual. It encourages practitioners to think about what might prevent children from identifying themselves as being exploited and the challenges in reducing risks for some children. In gaining a better understanding of the vulnerabilities it is anticipated that practitioners will be able to respond more effectively in identifying and addressing risks.

The full report gives more examples and explanations and practitioners are encouraged to read the report in full.

Feedback to the Boards is welcomed.

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³ Miller, D; Brown, J (2014) *'We have the right to be safe': Protecting disabled children from abuse.*