

Criminal/Sexual Exploitation - the online risk

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a type of sexual abuse. When a child or young person is exploited they're given things, like gifts, drugs, money, status and affection, in exchange for performing sexual activities. Children and young people are often tricked into believing they're in a loving and consensual relationship. This is called **grooming**. They may trust their abuser and not understand that they're being abused.

Children and young people can be trafficked into or within the UK to be sexually exploited. They're moved around the country and abused by being forced to take part in sexual activities, often with more than one person. Sometimes abusers use violence and intimidation to frighten or force a child or young person, making them feel as if they've no choice. They may lend them large sums of money they know can't be repaid or use financial abuse to control them.

Types of child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation can happen in person or online. An abuser will gain a child's trust or control them through violence or blackmail before moving onto sexually abusing them.

When a child is sexually exploited online they might be persuaded or forced to: send or post sexually explicit images of themselves, film or stream sexual activities or have sexual conversations. Once an abuser has images, video or copies of conversations, they might use threats and blackmail to force a young person to take part in other sexual activity. They may also share the images and videos with others or circulate them online.

Children or young people might be invited to parties or gatherings with others their own age or adults and given drugs and alcohol. They may be assaulted and sexually abused by one person or multiple perpetrators.

Signs of child sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation can be difficult to spot and sometimes mistaken for "normal" teenage behaviour. Some of the signs include:

- Unhealthy or inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Sharp changes in mood or character
- Being secretive, for example having money or things they can't or won't explain
- Physical signs of abuse, like bruises or bleeding
- Alcohol or drug misuse
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Pregnancy
- Having an older boyfriend or girlfriend
- Staying out late or overnight
- Missing from home or care, or stopping going to school or college
- Having a new group of friends or hanging out with older people

If a child reveals abuse or talks to you about sexual exploitation it's important to:

- listen carefully to what they're saying and say you'll take them seriously
- let them know they've done the right thing by telling you
- tell them it's not their fault
- don't confront the alleged abuser
- explain what you'll do next
- report what the child has told you as soon as possible

What is criminal exploitation?

Criminal exploitation is also known as '**county lines**' and is when gangs and organised crime networks groom and exploit children to sell drugs. Often these children are made to travel across counties, and they use dedicated mobile phone 'lines' to supply drugs.

Criminals deliberately target vulnerable children – those who are homeless, experiencing learning difficulties, going through family breakdowns, struggling at school, living in care homes or trapped in poverty.

These criminals **groom** children into trafficking their drugs for them with promises of money, friendship and status. Once they've been drawn in, these children are controlled using threats, violence and sexual abuse, leaving them traumatised and living in fear.

What are the signs of criminal exploitation and county lines?

- Returning home late, staying out all night or going missing
- Being found in areas away from home
- Increasing drug use, or being found to have large amounts of drugs on them
- Being secretive about who they are talking to and where they are going
- Unexplained absences from school
- 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

To report sexual exploitation:

- **Call 999 if the child is at immediate risk** or call 101 if you think a crime has been committed
- Call Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111 or report it online

What support is available?

Useful websites and charities:

- **Barnardo's** provide specialist advice and information on child sexual abuse and exploitation
<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>



- **The Children's Society** work closely with victims of criminal exploitation, giving them the support they need and trying to keep them safe from gangs
<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/>



- **NSPCC** aims to protect children and prevent abuse. They provide lots of accurate and up-to-date information and resources to help support children
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>



- **Childline** provide information and advice on sexual abuse, what you can do, who you can talk to and where you can find support
<https://www.childline.org.uk/>



- **Pace** works alongside parents and carers of children who are – or are at risk of being – exploited by perpetrators external to the family by offering support and advice
<https://paceuk.info/>

