

Caring for a Child who has been Sexually Exploited

Eileen Fursland

Published by

CoramBAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy

41 Brunswick Square

London WC1N 1AZ

www.corambaaf.org.uk

Coram Academy Limited, registered as a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales number 9697712, part of the Coram group, charity number 312278

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 910039 65 6

Project management by Shaila Shah, Director of Publications, CoramBAAF

Designed by Helen Joubert Design

Printed in Great Britain by The Lavenham Press

Trade distribution by Turnaround Publisher Services, Unit 3, Olympia Trading Estate, Coburg Road, London N22 6TZ

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Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to everyone who has contributed to this book or whose experiences, knowledge and research we have been able to include in it as useful resources for those who want to understand more about child sexual exploitation and how to support young people to recover from it.

Thanks to Dr Lucie Shuker of the University of Bedfordshire's International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking and to Fiona Darlington Black for their input and for commenting on the draft. Thanks also to Lisa Weintrobe, CoramBAAF's Information Officer, who supplied information about the law in different parts of the UK. Stuart Hannah, child and adolescent psychotherapist, provided helpful input. We are also grateful to the many other individuals and organisations whose inquiries, research and work in this area have informed this book. These include Dr Shuker, Dr Carlene Firmin and their colleagues from the International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking; Barnardo's Safe and Sound Group; The Blast Project; and PACE UK. Their work with young people who have been sexually exploited must be challenging and at times heartbreaking, but it is making young victims' voices heard and changing the way society and agencies support them and tackle this crime. PACE UK has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the impact on parents and carers and it does invaluable work to ensure that they have the information they need and to support them through the darkest times.

I would like to express my gratitude to CoramBAAF for publishing *Caring for a Child who has been Sexually Exploited* and, in particular, Shaila Shah for commissioning and editing it.

Finally, to the foster carers and other care workers who we hope will read this book, we greatly respect you for the vital and life-changing work you are undertaking.

About the author

Eileen Fursland is a freelance writer specialising in issues affecting children and young people. She has written extensively for BAAF (now CoramBAAF) on a number of publications since 2002, as well as for a range of magazines and national newspapers and other organisations.

Eileen's publications for BAAF include the training course *Preparing to Adopt* (she wrote the first edition in 2002 with a working party from BAAF which

devised the course, and the fourth edition, 2014, with Nicky Probert and Elaine Dibben); her books *Facing up to Facebook* (second edition 2013); *Social Networking and Contact* (2010); *Foster Care and Social Networking* (2011); *Social Networking and You* (2011); and *Ten Top Tips on Supporting Education*, with Kate Cairns and Chris Stanway. In earlier collaborations with Kate Cairns, she co-wrote BAAF's training programmes: *Trauma and Recovery*; *Safer Caring*; *Building Identity*; and *Transitions and Endings*.

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation can take many forms. Girls are groomed to believe that they are in a loving relationship – until the “boyfriend” starts to demand that she has sex with his friends and associates. Boys are being trapped in situations where they are being forced to have sex with many men, and threatened and attacked if they try to get out. Both girls and boys are sexually abused by other young people in street gangs. In many cases, child sexual exploitation (CSE) involves serious violence and in some cases, it also involves trafficking of several children or young people by organised groups of older men. Almost all cases of CSE involve online contact of one kind or another; it’s clear that social networking provides an easy way for perpetrators both to make contact with young people and to exert control over them with threats and intimidation.

The various inquiries and reports that have been, and are being, undertaken in recent years have shone a spotlight on different types of child sexual exploitation and the way that many young victims have been badly let down by the agencies and services that should be protecting them. In some cases the response of local authorities and police has been appalling: the Jay inquiry (Jay, 2014) into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013, for example, showed that the police, the local council and other professionals either did not believe what they were told, did not see it as abuse or felt unable to do anything about it. Victims asked for help and, shamefully, this was denied them. In the past, too many victims have been blamed and seen as promiscuous or even as “child prostitutes” – with tragic results.

There are still some people who do not understand the complex nature of CSE and the methods used to manipulate young victims, and who somehow see victims as having consciously chosen this path. But thankfully, much has been learned in the last few years about CSE. Our knowledge and understanding of the nature of CSE, and how perpetrators operate, are developing and attitudes are changing. Society as a whole is recognising that child sexual exploitation is an abhorrent crime that wrecks young lives.

A growing national priority

CSE is a growing national priority. Combating it involves agencies working together to identify victims, prosecute perpetrators and disrupt their activities wherever possible, support victims to help them recover, and to work on early prevention. It should also involve addressing wider social beliefs and cultures that can make it harder for us to see this form of abuse.

CSE can be classed as a particular type of sexual violence towards young people; in turn, sexual violence towards young people takes place in a broader context of societal sexual violence and gender inequality (Beckett *et al*, 2013).

Many practitioners are now exploring and developing new ways of working with young people and tackling this threat to their wellbeing, and there are many examples of good practice in services and projects.

Working with parents and carers

It is becoming clear from both working practice and academic research that working with parents and carers is crucial for both preventing and responding to CSE. The existing model of child protection was designed primarily to counter child abuse within the home, with the focus being on the parents and their behaviour. However, in child sexual exploitation the child or young person is the victim of an abuser who is usually from *outside the family*. In most cases, parents and carers are desperate to protect their child, while perpetrators drive a wedge between them and their child. So a new model is needed to respond to the specific emotional and relational dynamics of this situation and its impact on the family. In this “relational safeguarding model” (PACE UK, 2014), professionals work in partnership with parents and carers, supporting them to safeguard their child and increasing the chance of successfully prosecuting perpetrators.

Some children are already in care when they are exploited, so carers need to know how to spot the signs that they are at risk. However, a number of older children and young people are taken into care for their own safety, to remove them from the individuals and gangs perpetrating the CSE. In a few cases, for instance where there have been threats to families to intimidate them from giving evidence in court, victims are relocated together with their families.

There is debate about which form of care might be most appropriate and whether placing victims in foster placements or residential children’s homes or secure units is the best way to respond to CSE. Ideally, all victims should

be able to stay in their homes with their families, who would be supported to protect them, while the perpetrators would be the ones removed from the scene. Relocating a victim – because you can't keep them safe where they are – can potentially undermine them in other ways, disrupting some of their more positive relationships. And of course they cannot stay in the placement for ever.

There is a growing feeling that professionals and practitioners should try to avoid individualising CSE; they should focus less on the behaviour of individual children (for example, when young people are described as “putting themselves at risk”) and more on the links between CSE victims and perpetrators locally, the context(s) in which it occurs, and how CSE can be disrupted and prevented and the perpetrators convicted. This approach is known as “contextual safeguarding”.

In its latest guidance (Department for Education (DfE), 2017), the Government has said that agencies should move beyond a reactive approach (one that removes the individual from harm) to one that also addresses the existence of harm and/or proactively prevents that harm.

For the time being, however, it is still often the case that a child or young person is removed from the situation in order to keep them safe from their abuser(s) or because they are going missing and CSE is suspected. They are placed in foster care or a residential placement (sometimes far from home) or, in some cases, with a kinship carer or guardian. That means carers having to take on the challenging task of looking after a vulnerable child or young person who has been enticed, seduced, manipulated, threatened, degraded, hurt and terrified by their abusers.

If you are a parent, guardian, kinship carer or foster carer of a child or young person who has been sexually exploited, or if you work with such young people in a residential care setting, this book is for you.

The huge challenge facing anyone who is looking after a child – whether in a personal or professional role – who has been a victim of CSE is to show them that someone *does* care and that something *can* be done to turn things around.

But can you form a protective relationship with a child who has experienced things that no child ever should? Often they won't thank you for your care and concern – at least, not right away. Some young people don't perceive themselves to be a victim, don't want any intervention and reject attempts to help them – or are afraid of what their abuser might do to them if agencies get involved. They may be hostile to anyone who tries to help them get away from

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their abuser. Others are traumatised and terrified, convinced that no-one can protect them or help them.

Understanding what CSE is and how perpetrators groom, manipulate and intimidate their victims will enable you to better understand and support a child or young person who is experiencing it or has experienced it.

We hope this book will increase your understanding of CSE and responses to it, and that it will help you in the vital work of supporting the child in your care to stay safe, recover from their traumatic experiences, and start to rebuild their life.

What this book will cover (and what it won't)

Child sexual exploitation is a specific type of child sexual abuse (see below).

This book does not set out to cover every kind of child abuse and exploitation (though some of the information will be applicable in all situations).

We have included:

- CSE by individuals, organised groups and gangs (it can involve members of the family – though that is more rare, e.g. a mother who sells her daughter);
- CSE that occurs online.

We have not included:

- Child sexual abuse which is outside the definition of CSE, for example, sexual abuse by an adult where no “exchange” or “transaction” features and where the adult’s motivation is sexual gratification alone. This would include most cases of child abuse by adults in, for example, schools, residential institutions, sports, the church and youth organisations. Where this has occurred or is suspected, the police and/or children’s services should of course be informed (see Useful Organisations);
- Child sexual abuse within the child’s family (i.e. by members of the family or extended family);
- The sexual exploitation of children and young people trafficked into the UK from overseas (but see page 22)
- Exploitation of young people that does not involve any kind of sexual activity (e.g. forced labour).

2 Which children are at risk and what do we know about the signs of CSE?

Risk factors and vulnerabilities

No child is immune to becoming a victim of CSE. There are many different routes by which a child or young person can be victimised, involving a complex interplay of factors. Some of these factors relate to the child or young person themselves, while others are structural, e.g. being in residential care or living in a neighbourhood in which gang activity is rife.

The Government guidance on CSE, published in 2017, lists the following vulnerabilities as examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to child sexual exploitation:

- 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;

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- being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories);
- sexual identity.

Not all children and young people with these vulnerabilities will experience child sexual exploitation. Child sexual exploitation can also occur without any of these vulnerabilities being present.

(DfE, 2017, p8)

In terms of CSE that takes place or is initiated online, experts consider that children who show vulnerabilities in the “real world” may also be more vulnerable online than their peers. However, it is also the case that children and young people who would not be perceived as typically vulnerable (in the ways outlined above) are also coming to harm as a result of online sexual bullying, grooming and exploitation.

A Barnardo’s report (Barnardo’s, 2011) found that younger children were increasingly at risk of sexual exploitation – the average age of users of its services had fallen to around 13 in 2011.

In a more recent Barnardo’s survey (Fox and Kalkan, 2016), it was said that the demographic of the service users the charity supports has been changing due to the influence of the internet on CSE:

... in the past, our practitioners used to provide support to children who were vulnerable due to a lack of parental support. Now the internet has meant that children who have no existing vulnerabilities and do have parental protection can become victims.

(Fox and Kalkan, 2016)

There are some common preconceptions about CSE victims, e.g. that they are almost always young white women. However, the report of the Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into CSE in Gangs and Groups points out that, although victims are predominantly girls and young women:

- *children and young people from a range of ages, both girls and young women and boys and young men, of a range of ethnicities, who identify as heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian or bisexual, and some who are disabled, have been sexually exploited in either gangs or groups.*

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- *Furthermore, children from loving and secure homes can be abused in gangs and groups, as well as children with pre-existing vulnerabilities.*

(Berelowitz *et al*, 2012, p82)

A review of the evidence (Brown *et al*, 2016) on risk indicators and protective factors for both child sexual abuse and exploitation was carried out by Coventry University on behalf of the Early Intervention Foundation.

It found that there is a lack of good quality research on the risk and protective factors for becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of child sexual abuse or CSE. In fact, the only two strongly evidenced indicators for becoming a victim were:

- being disabled;
- being in residential care.

The report points out that researchers who have spoken to victims or looked at risk factors have also identified the following common variables, though the evidence for these is less strong:

- alcohol and/or drug abuse (though it is unclear whether this precedes or results from the abuse or exploitation);
- going missing, running away and escaping from abuse and other difficulties within the family (running away can result in the child being homeless, leading to vulnerabilities that can increase the risk of CSE; equally, it can be a sign that CSE is happening);
- being involved in gangs and groups.

(Brown *et al*, 2016)

Children living in residential children's homes

Residential care homes have improved their awareness of CSE and their protection of children at risk since the Parliamentary Inquiry in 2012 into Children who go Missing from Care (All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked after Children and Care Leavers, 2012) (see 'Providing support in children's homes', page 86).

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The 2012 Inquiry heard that perpetrators target children's homes specifically because of the high vulnerability of the children there and how easily they could make contact with them. The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England submitted evidence that it had:

...been informed about children's homes being targeted by perpetrators of child sexual exploitation, with multiple children across extended periods of time being groomed and abused by the same perpetrators

Sue Berelowitz, Deputy Children's Commissioner for England, told the Inquiry that:

These children are particularly vulnerable because they often feel unloved, and frankly they are often unloved, so they are very susceptible to being groomed by men who tell them how much they love them, and give them gifts. It is easy to see how such children can fall into the grip of exploiters... The young person can be left feeling deeply conflicted – wanting to escape and yet being drawn to their exploiter. When a young person feels unloved they are vulnerable to someone who says 'I love you so much I want to share you with all my friends'.

(Oral evidence session to the APPG Inquiry into Children Missing from Care)

An unnamed former care worker in Rotherham has told how sex abusers picked up girls as young as 11 from their children's home and in some cases sent taxis to collect them, making no attempt to disguise what they were doing:

The taxi drivers would get to know the girls while working on official council business... The girls would be taken by cab from the home to schools. But they would quickly start grooming them, giving them drugs and alcohol...

Young girls told the Inquiry they actively avoided using taxis at night. Drivers would take the longest route possible and ask them how old they were. The conversations would become flirtatious, often with references to sex.

Girls told how they would sometimes exchange sexual favours for lifts in taxis.

(Perry, 2014)

Gender

Many boys are also victims of CSE, though this is not always so readily recognised by professionals. Just like girls, boys can be intimidated by the use of violence, or threats of violence.

In an interview featured on the Barnardo's website, a young man named Samuel describes how his sexual exploitation began. At the age of 14, a friend introduced Samuel to a man he had met via the internet, and the man subsequently introduced Samuel to other men. Samuel was impressed by their money, and initially the relationships made him feel grown up.

But things turned sour and Samuel was being physically hurt. When he tried to distance himself, he was beaten up in the street.

I got a phone call a couple of days later, saying 'Don't try to get away from me or it will happen again'.

(Barnardo's, no date)

Samuel's intimidation was complete; his exploiters knew where he lived, where he went to school and who his friends were. Fortunately he was eventually helped to escape from the situation by a Barnardo's CSE service.

Boys and young males may be sexually exploited by older men who make contact with them on the streets, in pubs, parks and other places and online. Young men – either gay or straight – may be drawn into having sex with older men, for money or other reasons. And there are also cases in which boys are seduced by older women in a position of trust, such as teachers.

There is little support on offer for the victims, who can in any case be reluctant to seek out services related to sexual abuse. Some victims go on to become perpetrators.

Young male victims often present differently from female victims. The signs and symptoms of their CSE often point to youth offending rather than CSE. Just like girls and young women, they may be involved in other crimes, either being coerced into it by their exploiters, as a reaction to the CSE (e.g. damaging a perpetrator's car) or as a "survival" crime, such as stealing food or money because they are penniless and on the street. Boys' behaviour is often interpreted and treated differently.

Just like female CSE victims, some boys might not recognise themselves as victims or they may be unwilling or afraid to tell anyone. Also, professionals are

often less likely to ask boys the right questions or to spot the signs. Some boys might even prefer to be perceived as an offender rather than as someone who is being sexually exploited because of the stigma associated with the latter.

Greg (not his real name) was a victim of CSE that went unrecognised by many of the professionals with whom he came into contact. He believes they misinterpreted his difficulties because of his gender.

Greg came out as gay at the age of 12 and all his school friends ostracised him. His relationship with his single parent father broke down. He was depressed and isolated but no-one – including his social worker – offered any help.

He met a man through a gay social networking site who had claimed to be 18 but was actually 26, though by this point Greg was so desperate for a friend that he didn't care. The man and his friends introduced 12-year-old Greg to drink and drugs and bought him a mobile phone, clothes and trainers. At times they also physically hurt him. Greg's social worker interpreted his injuries, unexplained money and new clothes as signs that he was in a gang and referred him to a targeted prevention project for young people in gangs.

Greg was taken into foster care six months later but his (still unrecognised) sexual exploitation became even more extreme – he was being sent around the UK to meet groups of men who were so violent towards him that he twice ended up in the hospital accident and emergency unit. But he was too afraid to make a statement to the police. Eventually, at 13, he told a youth offending worker what was going on and social services were informed – but even after this, he says, nothing was done to help him.

On one occasion, one of his exploiters punched him in the face in the middle of a busy town centre but no-one stepped in – because, he believes, he was male and “boys fight” – even though his attacker was 13 years older.

Finally, after 18 months of horrific sexual exploitation, Greg's substance misuse and mental health reached such a dangerous point that he was admitted to a psychiatric hospital and was then at last referred to a Barnardo's CSE service.

He says that, all along, professionals had been making assumptions about his behaviour based on the fact that he was male and that if a girl had exhibited the same behaviours and signs of abuse, the CSE would have been recognised and measures would have been taken to safeguard her.

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We must end the gender stereotyping that blocks these boys and young men from being safeguarded. Believe me, their abusers are relying on it.

(The Blast Project, www.mesmac.co.uk/projects/blast/for-boys-and-young-men/real-life-stories)

Probably because there are more CSE services aimed at girls, girls are referred more, and tend to disclose more often than boys. If you take a proactive approach and look for boy victims you will find them, says Phil Mitchell, Project Co-ordinator of The Blast Project, the UK's leading male-only CSE service.

In 2015, The Blast Project completed the national male CSE development project "Excellence for Boys". This project was funded by the Department for Education and saw The Blast Project work in collaboration with CSE services in 20 local authorities; resulting in the number of boys identified as being at risk of CSE increasing from 91 to 249.

(The Blast Project, 2016)

The Blast Project has found that, in educational sessions on CSE, boys tend to say they believe they have to deal with things on their own, whereas girls tend to say they would tell people.

There is variation in how police forces respond to possible CSE, he says. While some police forces are excellent, in others:

If a boy is found having travelled miles from home he will just be put on a train or a bus and sent home, whereas a girl would be referred to a CSE service. And the police don't respond to parents' concerns about boys in the same way they do about girls.

(Phil Mitchell, Project Co-ordinator, The Blast Project, speaking at *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Prevention and Protection, Children & Young People Now* conference, December 2016.)

In the context of street gangs, there is sexual violence towards and exploitation of young men as well as young women. Former gang member Gwenton Sloley, who now runs a project to rehabilitate former gang members, has spoken about the use of sexual violence towards males.

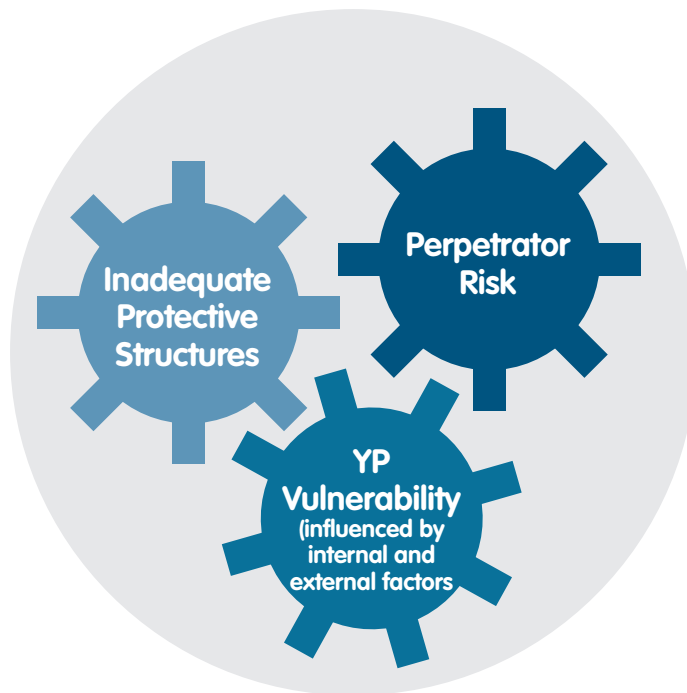
The sexual abuse that happens in gangs has a power element. What we have found is some gang members will use sexual abuse as a tool to degrade a person, film it and then put it on social media as blackmail or to say, 'I'm so

Which children are at risk and what do we know about the signs of CSE?

dangerous; I raped him'. It is used now as a weapon and it's increased a lot because it goes viral within seconds.

(Quoted in Vyas, 2015)

Interconnected conditions for CSE



(Beckett, 2011)

Various factors interact with each other to culminate in an individual child becoming sexually exploited. These include the child's own vulnerabilities; exposure to someone who would take advantage of them; the opportunities for perpetrators to come into contact with children, which have expanded due to social networking; and inadequate protective structures around the child.

Possible warning signs

Some of the following are warning signs that a child may be or is being sexually exploited, according to the report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner:

- going missing from home or care;
- physical injuries;
- drug or alcohol misuse (may be given to the child as part of the grooming process);
- involvement in offending;
- repeated sexually transmitted infections, pregnancies and termination;
- absence from school;
- change in physical appearance;
- evidence of sexual bullying/vulnerability through the internet and/or social networking sites;
- being estranged from their family;
- receipt of gifts from unknown sources;
- recruiting others into exploitative situations;
- poor mental health (e.g. emotional symptoms, trauma symptoms, problem behaviours, problems in relationships);
- self-harm or thoughts of or attempts at suicide.

(Berelowitz, 2012, p114)

Clearly, none of these signs on their own can be taken as indicating that a child or young person is a victim of CSE. It's also likely that there are other indicators that have not yet been identified. And relying on signs like these could mean missing some children and young people who are not behaving in these ways but who are still being sexually exploited.

There is an overlap between the indicators that CSE may be occurring and the factors that make children and young people more vulnerable to CSE.

...There is some overlap between what constitutes a "vulnerability factor" (something that may enhance vulnerability to child sexual exploitation) and

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a “risk indicator” (something that may indicate harm is occurring). Substance misuse is a good example. Drug use may increase a child/young person’s vulnerability to exploitation because it provides an abuser with a potential route for access and control; and victims of sexual exploitation may turn to substance misuse to cope with what they have experienced. If we are to pitch our responses appropriately, it is important we understand the nature of the relationship between the indicator/vulnerability and the risk/harm (which is contributing to the other?).

(Beckett et al, 2017)

Assessing the “risk” of CSE: some concerns about checklists and toolkits

Young victims rarely come forward to disclose that they are experiencing sexual exploitation and the reasons for this are complex (see Chapter 5). If there are suspicions that a young person is being sexually exploited, they are likely to be referred to a practitioner who has to try to work out what is going on in their life and their sexual relationships.

For the last decade, practitioners have been using CSE “toolkits” or “checklists of risk factors or signs of sexual exploitation” as a diagnostic measure of whether the child they are working with is at low, medium or high risk of CSE. For example, the indicators include things like “child has unaccounted-for money or goods including mobile phones, drugs and alcohol, always has credit on phone without access to money”; “stays out overnight without explanation”; and “adults/older youths loitering outside the child’s usual place of residence or school”.

However, some workers have serious concerns about these toolkits and point out that they have not been rigorously tested and there is no evidence base for their effectiveness or reliability (most of the studies on CSE victims have not compared victims with non-victim groups, therefore there was no control group). They feel there is an over-reliance on risk indicator lists.

As the systems have become more sophisticated and as teams have started to work together to tackle child sexual exploitation, risk indicator lists that were once used to loosely guide professionals turned into mandatory, rigid, diagnostic scoring systems within which indicators were labelled “low”, “medium” or “high” risk of CSE occurring without any study taking place

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to look at whether that labelling was accurate. Not only were indicators resigned to this labelling but children, too, were beginning to be labelled as “low”, “medium” or “high” risk of CSE depending on how many of the relevant indicators were ticked off on the checklist.

(Eaton, 2016)

Another issue is that some of the supposed “at risk” indicators clearly show that the child is already a victim who is actively being harmed, as opposed to “at high risk”, e.g. “signs of physical or sexual injuries with no explanation” and “being seen in hotspots, i.e. known houses, recruiting grounds or parties, ‘crack houses’.”

A child classed as “medium risk” in one authority could be classed as “high risk” in another, so they could be allocated a different service and level of expertise.

Indicators of CSE can be somewhat stereotypical, which means that professionals could be completely missing certain groups of victims because these groups do not display the usual indicators. Most checklists have been designed with girls in mind rather than boys, and consequently CSE in boys may be missed or misinterpreted if practitioners rely too much on these. In boys, the signs of CSE might be similar to the signs of involvement in offending (see above, p28).

The researchers said:

There is a lack of strong research evidence on which to base risk assessment tools. In order to develop these tools practitioners have had to rely on a range of sources of information including case reviews, local authority reviews, practice experience and/or the few emerging, mainly qualitative, exploratory studies recently published on CSE. This raises concerns about the quality of the evidence on which they are based. In addition, not surprisingly, given the high profile of investigations into large scale gang-related CSE in a number of local authorities, it could be argued that the tools may have been developed with this particular type of CSE in mind and thus possibly other types of CSE, and/or newly emerging forms of CSE, could be missing from these assessment tools.

(Eaton, 2016)

Which children are at risk and what do we know about the signs of CSE?

The researchers stress that professionals should be allowed and encouraged to use their professional judgement and that they should use tools and checklists only to underpin decision-making rather than determine decisions.