



Children's MARS Guidance

Child Sexual Exploitation Vulnerabilities and Risk Indicators Guide

August 2023

Introduction

This guide is an extract from [Child Sexual Exploitation Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation](#) (2017) Department for Education.

This guide sets out who is vulnerable to child sexual exploitation (CSE), vulnerabilities as examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to CSE and potential indicators of risk as children rarely self-report CSE so it is important that practitioners are aware of these.

The guide will not necessarily be completed in a standalone format to be included on a child's case file. It will be used as guidance to consider and recognise/identify children who are vulnerable to, at risk of, or who are already being sexually exploited as part of the risk analysis and information considered and gathered for an assessment.

This document should inform decision making on the next steps to be taken e.g. Early Help Assessment or referral to Children's Services.

Child Sexual Exploitation

The signs and indicators of all forms of abuse can be difficult to detect and CSE is no exception. A variety of factors can make it difficult to accurately assess how prevalent CSE is. Many children who are sexually exploited may have been victims of other forms of abuse; the grooming methods that may be used can mean that children who are sexually exploited do not always recognise they are being abused, which can also affect detection rates. What is clear is that child sexual exploitation can occur in all communities and amongst all social groups and can affect girls and boys. All practitioners should work on the basis that it is happening in their area.

Who is vulnerable to child sexual exploitation?

- **Any child, in any community**
CSE is occurring across the country but is often hidden so prevalence data is hard to ascertain. However, areas proactively looking for CSE are uncovering a problem. All practitioners should be open to the possibility that the children they work with might be affected
- **Age**
Children aged 12-15 years of age are most at risk of CSE although victims as young as 8 have been identified, particularly in relation to online concerns. Equally, those aged 16 or above can also experience CSE, and it is important that such abuse is not overlooked due to assumed capacity to consent. Account should be taken of heightened risks amongst this age group, particularly those without adequate economic or systemic support

- **Gender**
Though CSE may be most frequently observed amongst young females, boys are also at risk. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that boys may be less likely than females to disclose experiences of CSE and less likely to have these identified by others.
- **Ethnicity**
CSE affects all ethnic groups

Working Together makes clear the requirements for holistic assessment. Sexual exploitation is often linked to other issues in the life of a child or young person, or in the wider community context. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that CSE is complex and rarely presents in isolation of other needs and risks of harm (although this may not always be the case, particularly in relation to online abuse). CSE may be linked to other crimes and practitioners should be mindful that a child who may present as being involved in criminal activity is actually being exploited.

Practitioners should not rely on 'checklists' alone but should make a holistic assessment of vulnerability, examining risk and protective factors as set out in the statutory guidance Working Together.

Sexual exploitation can have links to other types of crime. These include:

- Child trafficking
- Domestic abuse
- Sexual violence in intimate relationships
- Grooming (including online grooming)
- Abusive images of children and their distribution
- Drugs-related offences
- Gang-related activity
- Immigration-related offences
- Domestic servitude

The following vulnerabilities are examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to CSE:

- 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

CSE can also occur without any of these vulnerabilities being present.

Potential indicators of child sexual exploitation

Children rarely self-report child sexual exploitation so it is important that practitioners are aware of potential indicators of risk, including:

- Acquisition of money, clothes, mobile phones etc without plausible explanation
- Gang-association and/or isolation from peers/social networks
- Exclusion or unexplained absences from school, college or work
- Leaving home/care without explanation and persistently going missing or returning late
- Excessive receipt of texts/phone calls
- Returning home under the influence of drugs/alcohol
- Inappropriate sexualised behaviour for age/sexually transmitted infections
- Evidence of/suspicions of physical or sexual assault
- Relationships with controlling or significantly older individuals or groups
- Multiple callers (unknown adults or peers)
- Frequenting areas known for sex work
- Concerning use of internet or other social media
- Increasing secretiveness around behaviours
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being

Practitioners should also remain open to the fact that CSE can occur without any of these risk indicators being obviously present. Practitioners should also be alert to the fact that some risk assessments have been constructed around indicators of face-to-face perpetration by adults and may not adequately capture online or peer-perpetrated forms of harm. It is also important to remember that risk assessments only capture risk at the point of assessment and that levels of risk vary over time, and that the presence of these indicators may be explained by other forms of vulnerability rather than CSE.

The first step for practitioners is to be alert to the potential signs of abuse and neglect and to understand the procedures set out by the Children's MARS Board. Those working with children and families should access training to support them in identifying vulnerability, risk and harm. This will help practitioners to know what action to take and to develop a shared understanding about what best practice looks like.

Concerns about the possibility of a child or young person being sexually exploited should be discussed with a manager, or a named or designated health professional or a designated member of staff, depending on the setting. If, after discussion, these concerns remain, and it seems that the child would benefit from other services; a decision should be made about whether an Early Help Assessment will be completed, a referral will be made to a specific service or a referral will be made to Children's Services.

Where professionals consider that a child/young person is a child in need due to concerns that their health or welfare may be significantly impaired due to being at risk of CSE or at risk of significant harm due to suspected or known sexual exploitation then a referral to Children's Services must be made in accordance with the [Children's MARS policy and procedure for assessing need and providing help](#).

Where it is suspected that a crime is being committed against a child, professionals should contact the police on:

- **101** non-emergency
- **999** emergencies
- Crimestoppers 0800 555 111