Official definition of child sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities.

Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain.

In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.

**This definition of child sexual exploitation was created by the UK National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG) and is used in statutory guidance for England.**

Child sexual exploitation at a glance

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of ***sexual abuse*** in which children are sexually exploited for money, power or status.

Children or young people may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship. They might be invited to parties and given drugs and alcohol. They may also be ***groomed online.***

Some children and young people are ***trafficked*** into or within the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation can also happen to young people in gangs

Child sexual exploitation is a hidden crime. Young people often trust their abuser and don't understand that they're being abused. They may depend on their abuser or be too scared to tell anyone what's happening.

It can involve violent, humiliating and degrading sexual assaults, including oral and anal rape. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, drugs, gifts, affection or status. Child sexual exploitation doesn't always involve physical contact and can happen online.

## Child sexual abuse online

When [sexual exploitation](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/) happens online, young people may be persuaded, or forced, to:

* send or post sexually explicit images of themselves
* take part in sexual activities via a webcam or smartphone
* have sexual conversations by text or online.

Abusers may threaten to send images, video or copies of conversations to the young person's friends and family unless they take part in other sexual activity.

Images or videos may continue to be shared long after the [sexual abuse](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-abuse/) has stopped.

Child sexual exploitation in gangs

Sexual exploitation is used in gangs to:

* exert power and control over members
* initiate young people into the gang
* exchange sexual activity for status or protection
* entrap rival gang members by exploiting girls and young women
* inflict sexual assault as a weapon in conflict.

Girls and young women are frequently forced into sexual activity by gang members. Research by [Beckett (2012)](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/#pageref2390) found girls considered to be engaging in casual sex were seen as forfeiting their right to refuse sex.

The majority of sexual exploitation within gangs is committed by teenage boys and men in their twenties ***([Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391)).***

What research tells us about child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation isn't a separate category of abuse in child protection procedures. This means data is often:

missing or incomplete

concealed in other categories of abuse or crime

unreported

***([Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391);*** [***CEOP, 2012***](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/#pageref2394)***).***

In law, there's no specific crime of child sexual exploitation. Offenders are often convicted for associated offences such as sexual activity with a child. Therefore it's not possible to obtain figures from police statistics of sexual exploitation offences ***([Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391)).***

Who sexually exploits children and young people

We don't know a great deal about who commits child sexual exploitation. Identifying abusers is difficult because:

* data often isn't recorded or is inconsistent or incomplete
* children and young people often only know their abuser by an alias, nickname or appearance
* victims may be passed between abusers and assaulted by multiple perpetrators
* children and young people are often moved from location to location and abused in each place
* young people may be given alcohol or drugs ***([Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391)).***
* The number of known perpetrators is likely to be far higher than those reported.

People who sexually exploit children are often described as highly manipulative individuals. They exert power over young people through physical violence, emotional blackmail or financial pressure , for example holding them in debt.

To maintain control or to distance children and young people from those who may be able to protect them, abusers create or exploit weaknesses such as:

* being isolated/distant from friends and family
* disengagement from services such as education or health
* challenging or criminal behaviour ***(***[***CEOP, 2011***](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/#pageref2394)***).***

The focus on manipulation and control has similarities with [domestic violence](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/domestic-abuse/), although more research is needed to establish this link and fully explore motivations for child sexual exploitation ([CEOP, 2011](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/#pageref2394)).

Gender, age and ethnicity of perpetrators

The Children's Commissioner's study found that:

* 72% of abusers were male
* 10% of abusers were female
* in 18% of cases gender wasn't disclosed ***([Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391)).***
* The evidence indicated that the age range of abusers was from 12 to 75 years.

Where ethnic group was recorded, the majority of perpetrators were White and the second largest group were Asian.

## Child sexual exploitation committed by children and young people

In 2012 Barnardo's reported an increase in sexual exploitation by peers in eight of their services. They found young people were sexually exploiting peers either directly by sexually abusing victims themselves or indirectly by introducing children and young people to abusers ***([Barnardo's, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2387)).***

The Children's Commissioner Inquiry found that of the 2,409 victims reported to them, 155 were also identified as perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (***[Berelowitz et al, 2012](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/%22%20%5Cl%20%22pageref2391)).***

According to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), perpetrators can use one victim to gain access to others, asking victims to bring their friends along to pre-arranged meetings or 'parties'. In some cases, if victims try to break free, the perpetrator will use their peers to draw them back in ([CEOP, 2011](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/#pageref2394)).

## Definitions:

***sexual abuse***

A child is sexually abused when they are forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This doesn't have to be physical contact, and it can happen online. Sometimes the child won't understand that what's happening to them is abuse. They may not even understand that it's wrong.

***Groomed Online***

Grooming is when someone builds an emotional connection with a child to gain their trust for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation.

Children and young people can be groomed online or in the real world, by a stranger or by someone they know - for example a family member, friend or professional.

Groomers may be male or female. They could be any age.

Many children and young people don't understand that they have been groomed, or that what has happened is abuse

***Trafficked***

Child trafficking is child abuse. Children are recruited, moved or transported and then exploited, forced to work or sold. They are often subject to multiple forms of exploitation. Children are trafficked for:

* [child sexual exploitation](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/)
* benefit fraud
* forced marriage
* domestic servitude such as cleaning, childcare, cooking
* forced labour in factories or agriculture
* criminal activity such as pickpocketing, begging, transporting drugs, working on cannabis farms, selling pirated DVDs, bag theft.

Many children are trafficked into the UK from abroad, but children can also be trafficked from one part of the UK to another

## References:

## *Berelowitz, S. et al (2012*) [“I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world.” The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s inquiry in to child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups: interim report (PDF).](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/force_download.php?fp=%2Fclient_assets%2Fcp%2Fpublication%2F636%2FFINAL_REPORT_FOR_WEBSITE_Child_Sexual_Exploitation_in_Gangs_and_Groups_Inquiry_Interim_Report__21_11_12.pdf) London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner.

***Beckett, H. et al (2012)*** [Research into gang-associated sexual exploitation and sexual violence: interim report (PDF).](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/force_download.php?fp=%2Fclient_assets%2Fcp%2Fpublication%2F637%2FUniversity_of_Bedfordshire_Report_final_for_website.pdf) Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

***Barnardo’s (2012)*** [Cutting them free: how is the UK progressing in protecting its children from sexual exploitation (PDF)](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/cuttingthemfree.pdf). London: Barnardo’s.

 ***(CEOP) (2011)*** Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre

[Out of mind, out of sight: breaking down the barriers to child sexual exploitation: executive summary (PDF).](https://www.ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/ceop_thematic_assessment_executive_summary.pdf) London: CEOP