edited by **Judy Cooper**
judy.cooper@rbi.co.uk

INSIDE THIS SECTION

18 How best to chair local safeguarding children boards
20 A parenting assessment tool
21 Questioning the evidence behind the Munro review

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Disturbing signs

How can professionals identify behaviour indicating young people are at risk of sexual exploitation? Camilla Pemberton reports

Children's charity Barnardo's recently called child sexual exploitation the "single biggest threat facing children and young people in the UK today". This stark warning followed high-profile abuse cases and in-depth police investigations – from Manchester to the seaside resort of Torbay in Devon – which exposed networks of criminal gangs targeting and grooming children for sex.

Abusers are becoming more sophisticated all the time, says Carlene Firmin, Barnardo's assistant director. "They manipulate and dominate young people so that they are frightened to seek help and keep the abuse underground." The charity has also seen a significant rise in domestic trafficking, where victims are moved between towns and cities to deliberately confuse and disorientate them.

Although sexual exploitation has shot up the political agenda – the government will publish a national action plan in the autumn – a report last week by the child protection agency CEOP criticised agencies, including social services, for failing to properly investigate cases. One of the main problems, investigators found, is that despite the increased national focus on this often hidden form of abuse, many professionals are still misinterpreting, or failing to recognise, warning signs.

Just one of the signs in our graphic, compiled with help from Barnardo's, could indicate a child at risk of sexual exploitation and should be followed up by a professional and assessed. "If you can't rule it out, rule it in," advises Firmin.

→ For the full interactive tool visit **www.communitycare.co.uk/exploitsigns**

ABUSE MODEL 1

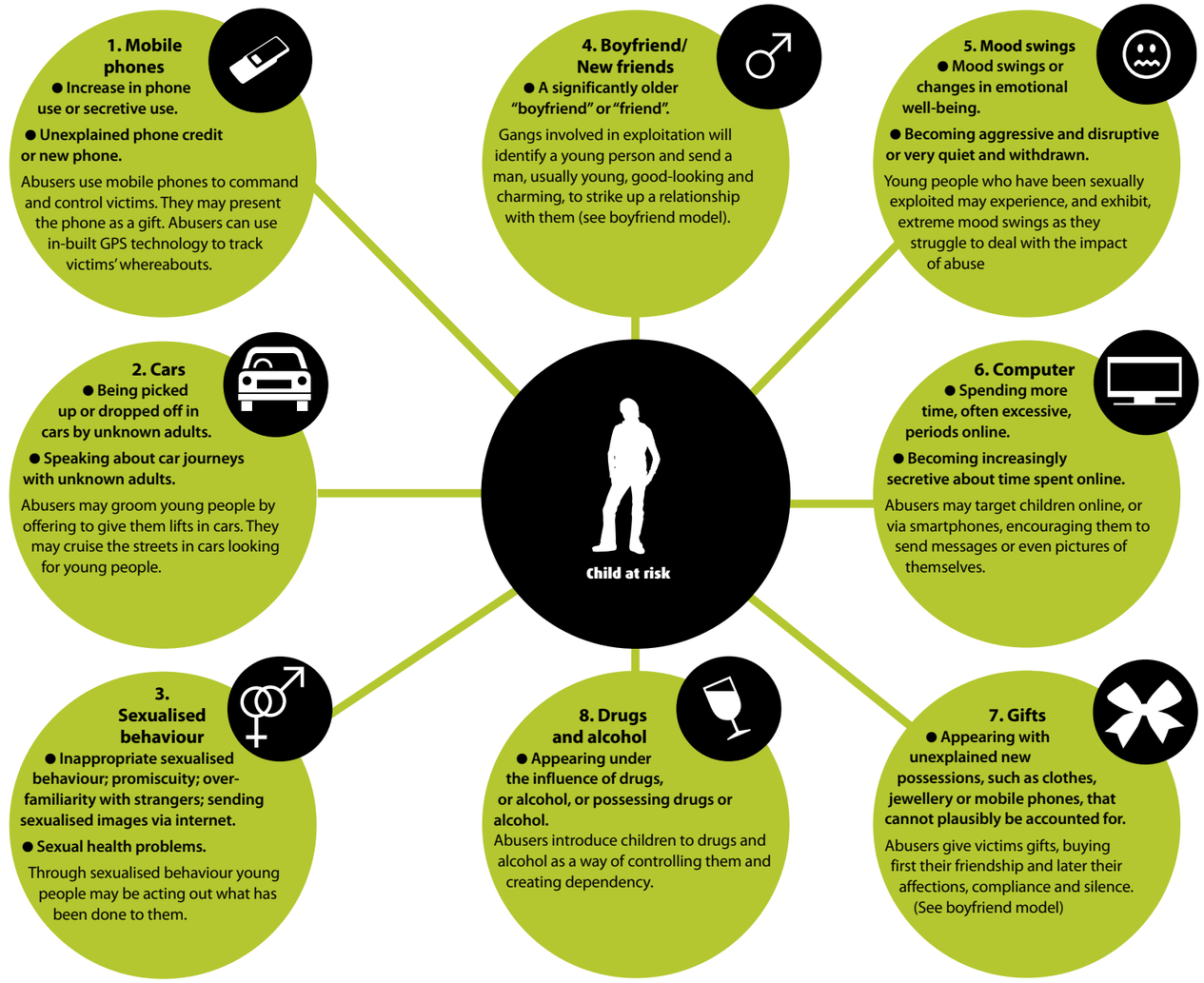
Inappropriate relationships:
Usually involves just one abuser who has inappropriate power – physical, emotional or financial – or control over a young person. The young person may believe they have a genuine friendship or loving relationship with their abuser.

ABUSE MODEL 2

Boyfriend:
Abuser grooms victim by striking up a normal relationship with them, giving them gifts and meeting in cafés or shopping centres. A seemingly consensual sexual relationship develops but later turns abusive. Victims are required to attend parties and sleep with multiple men and threatened with violence if they try to seek help.

ABUSE MODEL 3

Organised exploitation and trafficking:
Victims are trafficked through criminal networks – often between towns and cities – and forced or coerced into sex with multiple men. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious organised activity can involve the buying and selling of young people.



CIARAN HUGHES

FURTHER INFORMATION

Title Guide to safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation: Identification; response and prevention
Author Dr Andrew Durham, independent child care consultant, Sexualised Inappropriate Behaviours Service, Warwickshire County Council

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EXPERT ADVICE

Always consider the risk of sexual exploitation when working with young people and carrying out assessments.
- Share warning signs with other agencies, including police, health and teachers, to build up a picture of the young person's circumstances and assess the level of risk.
- See your local safeguarding children board's website to find local multi-agency information-sharing forums.
- If you are concerned that a child or young person is at risk, do not hesitate; make a child protection referral and identify a specialist service they could be referred to (see resources).
- Listen to children and take their disclosures or difficult behaviour seriously.
- Request more staff training in tackling child sexual exploitation (see resources).
- Pass on any possible evidence to police.

Because cases depend heavily on the evidence of children – who may be cross-examined by multiple barristers – many prosecutions collapse during trial.

Figures compiled by Barnardo's show there were only 89 convictions for child sexual exploitation in England and Wales in 2009, although 2,756 children were known to have been sexually exploited.

Source: Barnardo's; Safe and Sound Derby

RESOURCES

- Barnardo's: The charity runs 22 specialist projects nationwide, including the Secos (Sexual Exploitation of Children On the Streets) project in Stockton and Middlesbrough. For a list of services or their report *Puppet on a String* go to **http://tiny.cc/ti4fo**
- Social workers have joined police, sexual health workers, NHS workers and the third sector to fight sexual exploitation in Blackburn with Darwen; 01254 267 790
- Safe and Sound Derby: A specialist charity based in Derby committed to outreach work with sexually exploited children; **www.safeandsoundderby.co.uk**
- Just Whistle: Provides bespoke training and seminars on sexual exploitation; **www.justwhistle.org.uk**
- CEOP: The Child Exploitation and Online Protection centre works to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. Runs training courses; **www.ceop.police.uk**
- National Working Group for sexually exploited children and young people has a comprehensive list of research studies and articles on sexual exploitation **www.nationalworkinggroup.org/resources**