

Child sexual exploitation: learning from case reviews

Summary of learning for improved practice around child sexual exploitation

November 2013

Introduction

Case reviews highlight that **child sexual exploitation** can be particularly hard for professionals to recognise and respond to. Confusion around young people's rights and their capacity to consent to sexual activity means both young people and professionals often wrongly view exploitative relationships as consensual. This means that sexual exploitation often goes unidentified, and young people can be reluctant to engage with services.

The learning from these reviews highlights that professionals need to be aware of the warning signs of potential sexual exploitation and consider the child protection implications of underage sexual activity. Practitioners need to persevere to engage with young people and make sure the services provided are on-going and child-centred. The focus should be on ensuring young people's safety, protection and wellbeing, rather than managing their challenging or risk-taking behaviour.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on learning from case reviews published since 2010 where children were the victims of sexual exploitation.

The children in these case reviews became the subject of reviews following:

- serious and prolonged sexual exploitation

- murder or **suicide** following sexual exploitation which was not recognised prior to death.

Key issues

Confusion around sexual activity and the issue of consent

The fact that young people are engaged in what they view as consensual sexual activity does not mean that they are not being exploited.

- Victims of sexual exploitation may be coerced into sexual activity with the perpetrators or they may feel unable to say no.
- Some young people may not recognize they are being sexually exploited, instead believing they are behaving as they wish.
- 16 and 17 year olds are often viewed as being more in control of their own choices and so less vulnerable to exploitation.
- Sexual activity between young people of the same age is often perceived as being consensual, but exploitation may still be occurring.

Child sexual exploitation and risk-taking behaviour

Victims of sexual exploitation often display challenging, offending or risk-taking behaviour. Negative attitudes from professionals who view these children as 'troublemakers' can prevent them from getting the protection they need. However risk-taking behaviour is a key indicator of abuse.

- When dealing with troubled children, practitioners need to see young people as vulnerable children in need of protection rather than focussing on their challenging behaviour.
- Victims of exploitation who engage in offending behaviour should not be criminalised, but instead need protection and support.
- Perseverance is required to engage with young people. They may not realise they are being exploited, have had negative experiences with professionals in the past, or be scared of the consequences of talking about their abuse.

Vulnerability of children in local authority care, foster care or residential care

Being in care can make young people more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Many have had difficult starts to their lives and experienced neglect, abuse or trauma. Perpetrators target children's homes because of the high vulnerability of the children placed there and how easily they can make contact with the children.

Disclosure of sexual exploitation

Young people are unlikely to disclose sexual exploitation due to:

- fear of perpetrators
- loyalty to perpetrators
- lack of knowledge or acceptance that they are being exploited
- or lack of trust and fear of authorities.

Too often, even when young people do disclose abuse, no actions are taken by agencies against perpetrators or to support young people and the abuse continues.

Learning for improving practice

Identifying and assessing child sexual exploitation

- **Be aware of warning signs of potential sexual exploitation and grooming**

Practitioners must be aware of the warning signs of potential sexual exploitation and grooming. Victims of sexual exploitation often display challenging or offending behaviour, but risk-taking behaviour is a key indicator of abuse.

Warning signs of potential exploitation include: underage sexual activity; sexual health concerns; teenage pregnancy; getting involved in crime; concerning relationships, especially with unknown adults; alcohol and drug misuse; going missing from home or placement; truancy, exclusion and disengagement from school.

The majority of victims in case reviews involving child sexual exploitation are girls. Groups particularly at risk include: children in local authority care, foster care or residential care; and young people who have had difficult early life experiences, including childhood abuse and domestic violence.

- **Consider the child protection implications of underage sexual activity**

Professionals providing sexual health services (including contraception) should consider the child protection implications of possible abuse or exploitation whenever they become aware of underage sexual activity.

- **Carry out early and comprehensive assessments**

An early and comprehensive assessment should be carried out. Without a comprehensive assessment, practice becomes task focussed so that individual

incidents are addressed, for example sexual health concerns, but the bigger picture of child sexual exploitation is missed.

- **Establish a complete picture through assessments from different agencies**

Assessment should draw on knowledge from different agencies so that a complete picture can be established in cases where sexual exploitation is suspected.

- **Assess the young person's capacity to consent**

The fact that young people are engaged in what they view as consensual sexual activity does not mean that they are not being exploited. Victims of sexual exploitation may be coerced into sexual activity with the perpetrators or they may feel unable to say no. Other young people may not recognise they are being sexually exploited, instead believing they are behaving as they wish. Sexual activity between young people of the same age is often perceived as being consensual, but exploitation may still be occurring.

Any assessment of child sexual exploitation must also include issues of 'capacity to consent', taking into account the grooming process and issues of coercion which may be experienced by victims of child sexual exploitation.

Interventions

- **Balance a young person's rights with the need to protect**

16 and 17 year olds are often viewed as being more in control of their own choices and so less vulnerable to exploitation.

Practitioners need to balance the young person's right to make their own decisions and assess their own risk, with the need to protect the young person from exploitation. Even when a young person is unaware or doesn't accept that they are at risk, or when risks to the young person's safety arise from their own behaviour and the decisions they make, professionals still need to intervene to prevent exploitation.

- **Engage young people with services**

Practitioners need perseverance and patience to help disengaged young people engage with and remain involved with services aimed at protecting and supporting them.

- **Consider the wider context of young people's risk taking behaviour**

When dealing with troubled children, practitioners need to see young people as vulnerable children in need of protection rather than focussing on their challenging behaviour. Victims of exploitation who engage in offending behaviour should not be criminalised, but instead need protection and support.

Services need to embed a child-centred approach where children at risk of exploitation are viewed as vulnerable children in need of protection. Children need to be listened to and their experiences accepted, so trust can develop and young people can feel supported and able to disclose their experiences.

- **Provide on-going support**

Victims of sexual exploitation may need on-going support to ensure they are protected from further exploitation in the future.

Identifying and dealing with perpetrators

- **Take disclosures seriously**

Young people are unlikely to disclose sexual exploitation due to: fear of or loyalty to perpetrators, lack of knowledge or acceptance that they are being exploited, lack of trust and fear of authorities. Too often, even when young people do disclose abuse, no actions are taken by agencies against perpetrators or to support young people and the abuse continues.

Disclosure from young people of underage sexual activity or sexual exploitation needs to be taken seriously and dealt with as a crime. Actions taken following disclosure should not depend on the victim's willingness to act as a witness in a criminal trial.

Identify perpetrators and prevent child sexual exploitation from continuing

- Perpetrators need to be identified quickly and a case built against them by the police. They need to be prosecuted so that victims can feel safe, have trust in the authorities and feel confident that agencies can protect them.

Collect profiles of victims to help identify ways to reduce future exploitation

- To reduce future exploitation, victim profiles should be compiled and collated. This information can be used to identify local 'hotspot' locations or methods that are used to target potential victims.

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