

# Disclosure or exposure? Why young people may not seek or want your help (at first)

## A Briefing for the Police

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This briefing is for people working in the police and is produced as part of the work supported by the CSE & Policing Knowledge hub. The CSE & Policing Knowledge hub aims to promote knowledge exchange and learning between academia and the police at national and local levels. The briefing is relevant for all practitioners and people working in the police who have a role to play in intervening in and supporting young people abused through sexual exploitation. It is particularly relevant for those working in a multi-agency context, providing useful background knowledge to inform management of disclosure in order to facilitate police intervention and prosecution of perpetrators.

### 2. KEY MESSAGES

- Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is connected to and bound up with other problems and difficulties young people are experiencing. Underpinning the exchange that occurs through this form of sexual abuse is the meeting (and taking advantage) of unmet needs.

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- For some young people sexual exploitation can be something expected, a form of regaining control and ‘value’ over their bodies and their lives, a ‘least worse choice’ and/or a coping mechanism. Unless the underlying needs and problems are addressed and met in other ways, young people are unlikely to disclose or are likely to withdraw their disclosure.
- A young person may have the additional fear of disclosure or of seeking help because of the coercion and control and/or the potential repercussions from those who are exploiting them. Young people’s family and friendship networks may be connected to the exploitation, and these can contribute to a feeling that the sexual exploitation is something ‘normal’ or expected, as well as working against disclosure for fear of the complete disruption to their lives.
- Young people affected by CSE report feeling ignored by and ‘invisible’ as a person to professionals, and only of notice for their need. For some young people this was understood to form the basis for their vulnerability to CSE. At the point of contact and/or disclosure, practitioners who are perceived to focus on the factual information in a young person’s case at the expense of listening to or understanding their individual experiences can compound and reinforce a young person’s vulnerability.
- Young people may have concerns about police and practitioner involvement, and specifically about the repeated disclosure of their experiences that is required when police or the courts are involved. This can leave them feeling negatively exposed and vulnerable.

### **3. The research study**

The findings discussed in this briefing are from a wider qualitative research study into child sexual exploitation (CSE). The research involved young people aged between 14-17 years with experiences of CSE, and professionals from policing, health, education, youth work, third sector and social work backgrounds. The overarching research aim was to provide an in-depth understanding of CSE, from the perspectives of these two groups of participants – in terms of what CSE is and what

can and should be done about it. The research used participatory methods, semi-structured interviews, and a 12 month fieldwork placement. Ethical considerations were overseen and approved by Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

#### 4. 'THE THINGS GOING ON' – THE WIDER CONTEXT SURROUNDING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

CSE was described by the young people in this study as being connected to and bound up with other problems and difficulties young people are experiencing. There are interconnecting reasons why a child or young person may come to be sexually exploited. At root, the young people in this study felt they had been vulnerable to CSE because of issues that had not been addressed or had left them feeling ignored and unacknowledged. They felt invisible in various ways to practitioners, their families, and those who should have helped them. Without this help, they were left exposed and vulnerable to those who wanted to exploit them for sex.

Underpinning the exchange that occurs through this form of sexual abuse is the meeting (and taking advantage) of unmet needs. 'Child sexual exploitation' was described and referred to as 'people taking advantage in a sexual way'. The young people considered that CSE could happen to any person having to manage without the care, attention and material support that most people need. All of the young people reported being aware of their sexual exploitation. For some young people, exchanging sex can sometimes seem to be the only solution, or 'least worst' alternative for them to respond to their need. In the example below, Nathan explains how he felt unable to talk to people about his sexuality and this left him vulnerable to sexual exploitation:

*Nathan: ... it's really really difficult to know how to describe it because um, because of the lack of choice and thing, with um especially if you're closeted because um, it's very hard to start up a conversation with a person with the same type of orientation and. It's, it kind of leads you into accepting things [pause] which you wouldn't normally if there was more people because [pause] you're alone because you've got a secret and*

*you can't tell people about it [pause] so whoever comes along and is able to deal with it whether that be a person who is just going to use you, the fact that you can tell them and you can speak to them [pause] that uh kind of leads you open to [long pause] because it relieves one kind of strain on you and you they've got that little bit of control over you, which means they can twist things and it can go downhill.*

This wider context of unmet and unaddressed needs surrounding sexual exploitation can mean that young people may not perceive their relationships or encounters as sexual exploitation. For some young people, exchanging sex can be a resource or a coping response made in severely adverse circumstances. It can also be a way of regaining power and control where there has been previous sexual abuse, as Katie explains below, in referring to the previous sexual abuse she had experienced:

*Katie: it cheapens it a bit. Like you think, oh well I may as well get paid for doing it.*

For some young people their abuse may be 'normalised', this can be especially so for those who have experienced previous sexual abuse, and/or where perpetrators of the sexual exploitation are part of or connected to family and friends.

Young people may be unlikely to want to seek help for four main (interconnected) reasons: for various reasons they may not view the abuse as abuse; the sexual exploitation may be meeting a need that experience may tell them is unlikely to be addressed by those seeking to help them; their previous experiences with helping professionals can work against them seeking help and disclosure; they may be subject to threats and coercion from their abusers and afraid to ask for help for fear of the consequences for them and/or others.

## **Talking about intimate and personal things is difficult**

The importance of listening and talking to young people was emphasised by all the young people as being the most important thing for professionals to be mindful of when seeking to help victims of sexual exploitation.

Many of the young people talked about how they felt that professionals can disregard the difficulty any person – adult or child – can feel in relaying personal and intimate details about themselves.

*Leah: Sometimes professionals expect young people to just sometimes just lay it on a plate for them*

Recognising this difficulty is particularly important when the sorts of detail a young person may want to relay are painful and distressing. The young people relayed how they needed to feel that this difficulty was acknowledged and addressed by those they were talking to. They spoke of the negative consequences that can occur if professionals are perceived as focussing on the factual information related to the young person's case at the expense of listening to or understanding their individual experiences. As Claire tells us:

*Claire: they listen but it's like a false listening, they just write it on a piece of paper and, you know we'll deal with it sort of thing but you're not getting any sense of understanding of it [...] the kid may actually flip out, and just say sorry you don't know how I feel and blah blah blah blah, and then gets even more angry and that will be the cycle, and then the kid will think, what the hell am I doing here, I'm trying to tell them how I feel, and they don't believe me so then the self-esteem goes down and down and down, and they've got no one to talk to then.*

The potential lasting memories of the negative experience of disclosure and the consequences can be glimpsed below in what Claire says elsewhere in the research:

*Claire: School, that's important. If you talk to your teachers about information about this or this sort of thing, um, then you tell them there's something going on in your life, that's a bad situation because then they'll involve the police and parents and you don't want to be in that situation.*

Claire's advice to other young people is that they shouldn't tell anyone about their sexual exploitation as it will mean having the police and parents involved, because from her experience police and parental involvement is a bad thing.

Talking is just as important as listening. The young people all spoke about talking as both a potential positive and negative. Talking, when it is done well, is more like a conversation between the young person and the person they are talking to, and something that will leave the young person feeling acknowledged as a person, and that someone has genuinely heard and taken into account what they had to say. When talking involves just the young person speaking it can be uncomfortable and provoke anxiety, as Danny tells us:

*Danny: it goes both ways [pause] like I hate the idea of people just sitting there staring at me where they're waiting for me to say something, like you know, what am I supposed to say and then you get nervous and think oh I'm not going to be able to say anything.*

The difficulties surrounding their sexual exploitation can mean that the young person may feel uncertain about disclosing their abuse to professionals, they may not know how to speak of it, and may feel afraid to acknowledge it to others.

## **Time and trust is vital**

This uncertainty and difficulty means that developing trust and giving young people time to relay what is happening to them is vital to positive engagement and obtaining their disclosure. The context of CSE means that young people are likely to reject help and support, something expressed by Katie, below:

*Katie: people need to spend time talking to them to find out what's really going on, what they really need you know. I said I didn't want help but I needed it.*

As indicated previously, there are very strong factors preventing young people from disclosing and seeking help, and little reason in support of doing so. Giving young people time to develop trust is important:

*Danny: um, talking about it, that helps, just like being able to talk to them about it. And even if they don't talk about it, it will come out eventually like I've been like that, so just being quiet and um, 'cos you trust you get trust in that person then, after you've seen them for a while they'll talk more.*

As glimpsed in what Danny says, young people may relay aspects of their abuse of test out the response, to see if the person helping them can be trusted. They may revoke what they have said because of anxiety, and they may reintroduce these or similar facts again at a later date. The more trust that is achieved, the more the young person is likely to respond with the sorts of detail that professionals need in order to respond and help them. Without a relationship of trust with those they spoke to, the young people could not be certain of how the disclosed information about themselves would be perceived, and how they would be perceived. Yet they also talked about needing to talk to someone and to get help.

## **Your reaction matters**

Another significant theme from the research was the importance of people's reactions to disclosure. What people do when they initially 'find out' or hear about the abuse really mattered to the young people:

*Leah: It's just like being able to talk about stuff, things, where they're not going to run off and tell other people and start gossiping and stuff like that, I mean she [worker] doesn't give a reaction and if she does it's always a positive one she's not like 'oh my god' and make you feel like, oh I must be bad if her reaction's that.*

Leah's account is typical in that the young people emphasised the importance of professionals and carers not being "shocked", not "over-reacting", and of the need for such adults to stay calm about what they heard. They were concerned about the judgements people may make about them, and they needed to hear affirming and positive responses from professionals.

Issues of confidentiality were particularly important for them. They relayed negative experiences of disclosure where they felt people would be unnecessarily informed about the intimate details they had relayed, and for many of them this formed the reason why they chose to talk about their abuse and how they were feeling to professionals who couldn't know who they were:

Hannah: sometimes some people find it easier just talking to blank strangers, um [pause] with no names you don't need to tell them your name or their name or whatever, um [pause] and they can't pass anything on because they don't know your name or where they got it from

Finding a safe arena for sharing information is important. It is critical for a young person to have some control over what was being revealed to whom and when. There is a tension the young people have to manage between wanting people to know about their situations because they need help and the potential to feel ashamed by people's reactions, and of being 'known' by others who become party to that information and not by their choosing. The importance of this point can be emphasised by the troubling similarities between the ways the young people talked about this concern and the ways they talked about their concerns about 'being known' by multiple abusers, and of abusive images of them being viewed online by anyone who wanted to view them.

It is a fear of 'being known' that can also mean young people do not ask for the help they need. When young people do not have established trusting relationships, to ask for help is to risk uncomfortable and anxiety provoking exposure. When young people relayed positive experiences of disclosure it was when confidentiality was fully explained to them, when they felt confident that they knew what was going to happen to their information and why and they trusted the person relaying this information to them to do what they said they would.

Relatedly, some of the young people talked about not wanting to have to keep going over their experiences with different professionals as they found this uncomfortable and distressing. Knowing who knew what and why helped them to feel confident in the processes that occurred after their initial disclosure(s).



## **5. CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS**

Sexual exploitation occurs in a wider context that makes it very difficult for young people to ask for help. Talking about intimate experiences to people is difficult for any person. This is made more so when these are painful and distressing experiences. Giving young people time and developing trust with them, and engaging in active listening and talking are vital to engaging a young person in support. For young people in positions of vulnerability, talking about their experiences can be experienced as an uncomfortable exposure – where they can feel they are objects of concern, known only for their need and ignored and judged as a person by people who know very personal and intimate details about them. Alternatively, talking about the same experiences can be experienced as safe disclosure and feeling as someone who is acknowledged, respected and understood. In managing disclosure, it is your reaction and the young person's control over what they reveal, how it is revealed and with whom these details are shared that makes the difference for a young person. This can form part of tackling the problem itself.

## REFERENCES

*For further reading on this specific research project:*

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