

CSE Research: Short Practice Films for the Police

Research Briefing

Why might some young people be reluctant to disclose CSE? What the police can do to respond

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Text of the film

Police often seek disclosures from victims and witnesses of crime in order to support the process of gathering evidence for investigations and prosecutions. Achieving Best Evidence guidelines tells us that a key aim of the ABE interview is to establish the evidence-in-chief of the witness. However, there are complex social, relational and individual forces at work that mean the victims of child sexual exploitation don't often provide that vital disclosure.

Disclosure of CSE can be inhibited by, for example, young people accepting harmful sexual norms that exist in some elements of youth culture and broader society that 'normalise' some forms of CSE;

Perpetrator grooming strategies, manipulation and coercion can mean that young people don't want to seek help because they fear the consequences to themselves or their families.

Young people may also have had previously poor experiences of services and professionals which mean they don't trust those services to keep them safe.

Young people may blame themselves for the abuse.

They may not realise that their experiences are abusive.

Or they may believe they are making a choice (a point that Professor Pearce tells us in her [film on consent](#)).

Police can help build confidence in young people by accepting that disclosures may take some time, by not pressuring young people to disclose before they are ready and working with partners to ensure that timely practical and emotional support is available.

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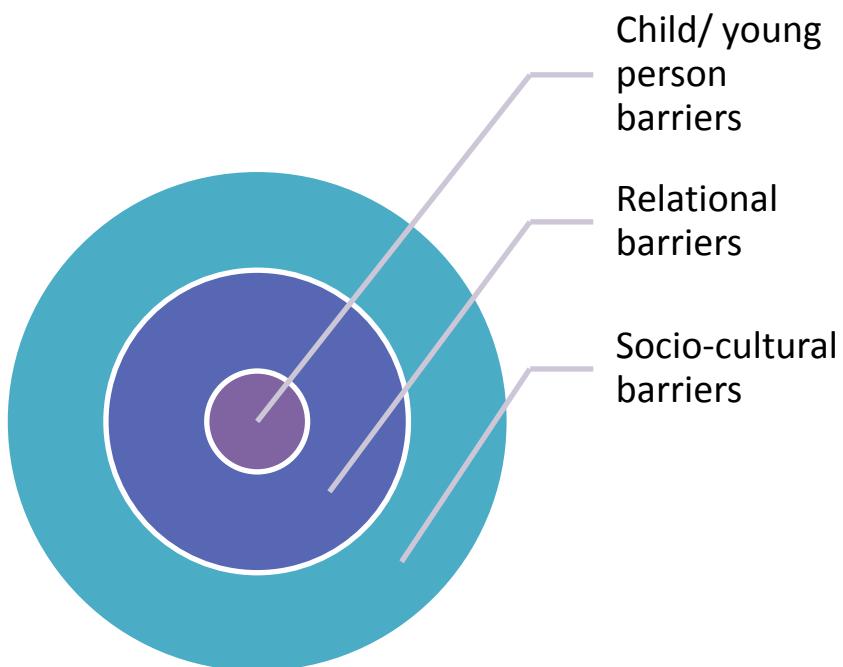
Police should also consider other options, however, in the absence of disclosure, such as the use of civil orders and other disruption methods.

CSE is a complex form of abuse which means that many young people won't disclose. This should not stop professionals, including police, from finding ways to safeguard and protect young people.

Research Summary

Practitioners working with young people, including the police, often find it hard to understand why many young people who have experienced CSE do not easily seek help and disclose their abuse. Academic research aimed at understanding why children and young people find it difficult to disclose child sexual abuse has revealed a host of complex, inter-connected barriers to help-seeking. Figure 1 below illustrates that these barriers may 1) rest within individual children and young people; 2) be associated with particular relationships that children and young people have with others; or 3) relate to broader, socio-cultural processes that inhibit children and young people from recognising or seeking help.

Figure 1: A framework for understanding the complex reason why young people do not disclose child sexual exploitation



This practice briefing draws on both international and UK-based research evidence to describe some of these barriers and, at the end, offers questions that may be helpful for police to reflect on. This briefing is useful for any front-line police officer that may come into contact with young people where it is suspected or known that CSE has taken place. It may be particularly useful for police who conduct Achieving Best Evidence Interviews where, traditionally, direct disclosures constitute a key piece of evidence.

Barriers that relate to individual children or young people

Some barriers are *internal* to a child or a young person which may stop them from disclosing abuse. Children, young people and adults that have participated in research about child sexual abuse/ exploitation have described how:

- it can be difficult to recognise abuse because children and young people may lack examples of healthy relationships with which they can compare.
- children and young people may believe they are in a ‘loving’ relationship.
- children and young people may be willingly receiving something in return.
- children and young people may lack the language/vocabulary to describe their abuse.
- children and young people may be anxious that their own criminality and violence will be identified.
- guilt and shame can stop help-seeking and are powerful motivators for staying silent.
- experiencing significant emotional trauma as a result of their exploitation or other, earlier, experiences of violence and abuse can make it difficult to seek help (see Dr. Kristine Hickle’s film and practice paper on [trauma-informed policing](#)).
- Particular forms of abuse may add extra layers of complexity to disclosure. For example, children and young people abused via the internet are likely to be affected by the permanence of the images and anxious about others seeing the abuse.

Barriers in relation to others

Other barriers faced by children and young people sit in relation to others, such as family members, perpetrators and professionals who are supposed to be protecting them:

- The nature of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator may negatively impact on children and young people’s ability to disclose. The CSA literature notes that intra-familial perpetrators may make disclosing harder than extra-familial perpetrators, but where there is an emotional tie (regardless of the abusive nature of it), young people may find it difficult to seek help.
- Perpetrators often issue threats against children and young people aimed at keeping them afraid and silent. Threats may be overt or subtle, and may be directed at young people themselves or at their family members. Trafficked children and young people are often coached by traffickers to tell specific stories and they may fear for their families or fear their own deportation.
- The grooming processes employed by perpetrators also function to maintain silence and prepare children and young people for abuse.
- Children and young people may lose trust in others if they have had a negative response to their disclosure and this may prevent them from seeking further help. This includes professionals such as the police.
- Service providers may not notice signs and symptoms or they may not ask whether a child is alright – some children and young people say they would like to be asked.
- Young people who have observed economic cuts to services have said they do not feel there is a viable service available to help them.
- Discriminatory attitudes by service providers may prevent a safe context for disclosing.

- Young people may worry about being judged by others as ‘undeserving’ of help and protection – a finding particularly evident in gang-related research.

Socio-cultural barriers

There are broader dynamics that also can influence whether or not children and young people disclose abuse:

- There are discriminatory societal attitudes and stereotypes that may shut down young people’s ability to seek help. For example, boys may find it difficult to disclose abuse because they worry they will be labelled as potential perpetrators of abuse or they may worry they will be labelled as ‘gay’ (if the abuse is perpetrated by a male).
- There are also, in general, fewer services and educational initiatives around male CSE. Many campaigns designate females as the victims and males as offenders. Male CSE is still not commonly acknowledged in same way female CSE is and males may not, therefore, know where or how to seek help.
- Young people in particular communities may struggle to disclose because of the shame that attaches to families and the whole community as a result. The risks of disclosing CSE may be perceived as too high – these risks can include being sent back to country of origin, being married early or being forced into marriage.

Issues for practice reflection

Given the above evidence, it is recommended that the police respond sensitively to young people where CSE is suspected or evidenced. It is important for the police to recognise that it may take time to gain a child or young person’s trust, but there are things that young people tell us will help to build that trust (See Figure 2 below, Beckett et al, 2016).

Figure 2: Good practice when police are responding to safeguarding concerns



The police can also consider the use of a range of disruption methods if a disclosure is absent or slow to emerge. There are a range of civil orders that could be considered to disrupt and protect children including, for example:

- Child Abduction Warning Notices
- Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and Sexual Risk Orders
- Slavery and Trafficking Prevention Orders and Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders
- Closure notices and hotel information requests.

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Is there someone you know who would benefit from seeing this short film?
If so, take a minute to pass it on <https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/responding-to-cse/videos>.

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