

Parent and Carers Guide to Child Exploitation



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Introduction

In 2019, OFCOM found that children aged 5-15 now spend an average of 2 hours a day using the internet with 91% of children in this age category having access to the internet at home. A growing number of children have access to smart devices, enabling them to access various social media platforms. The use of these platforms has further increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic which saw children take to remote learning for their education. It is therefore important that parents, carers and professionals are able to recognise and respond to the risk the internet can pose in relation to Child Exploitation.

Child exploitation refers to the use of children for someone else's advantage, gratification or profit often resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child. These activities are to the detriment of the child's physical or mental health, education, moral or social-emotional development. It covers situations of manipulation, misuse, abuse, victimization, oppression or ill-treatment.

The purpose of this guidance is for parents, carers and professionals to understand Child Exploitation. This guidance seeks to provide an understanding of the signs of Child Exploitation, how children become exploited, what to do when it is suspected that a child is being exploited and how social media plays a part in the exploitation of children.

It is important to note that whilst Child Exploitation comes in many forms and has different names. Online grooming and exploitation can happen by strangers as well as people they may know. Child Exploitation is a form of child abuse.

Definitions and Further Information

Child exploitation refers to the use of children for someone else's advantage, gratification or profit as mentioned above however, it is helpful to understand the definitions of some of the forms of exploitation.

Sexual Exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

The [Department for Education](#) (2017) defines child sexual exploitation as 'A form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. A child under the age of 13 cannot be considered to have given consent. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology

Child Sexual Exploitation can:

- Affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years, including 16 and 17 year olds who can legally consent to have sex;
- Can still be abuse even if the sexual activity appears consensual;
- Can include both contact (penetrative and non-penetrative acts) and non-contact sexual activity;
- Can take place in person or via technology, or a combination of both;
- Can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and may, or may not, be accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
- May occur without the child or young person's immediate knowledge (through others copying videos or images they have created and posting on social media, for example);
- Can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and children or adults. The abuse can be a one-off occurrence or a series of incidents over time, and range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse; and
- Is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.

County Lines

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation where urban gangs persuade, coerce or force children and young people to store drugs and money and/or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns (Home Office, 2018). It can happen in any part of the UK and is against the law and a form of child abuse.

The UK Government defines county lines as ‘A term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons’.

County lines gangs are highly organised criminal networks that use sophisticated, frequently evolving techniques to groom young people and evade capture by the police.

Perpetrators use children and young people to maximise profits and distance themselves from the criminal act of physically dealing drugs (National Crime agency, 2019). Young people do the majority of the work and take the most risk.

Dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines” are used to help facilitate county lines drug deals. Phones are usually cheap, disposable and old fashioned, because they are changed frequently to avoid detection by the police.

Gangs use the phones to receive orders and contact young people to instruct them where to deliver drugs. This may be to a local dealer or drug user, or a dealer or drug user in another county. Phrases that young people may use to refer to county lines and going out of town to deliver drugs or money include:

- ‘Running a line’,
- ‘Going OT/out there’
- ‘Going country’
- ‘Going cunch’.

(Thurrock Council, 2020).

Cuckooing

Cuckooing happens when a county lines gang takes over the home of a vulnerable adult by coercion or force, and use it as a base to deal drugs from. The vulnerable adult may have issues with substance misuse or mental health problems, be elderly or disabled or be in debt to the gang. These factors can make it easier for the gang to exploit and control them.

Children can be forced or coerced to stay at cuckooed addresses for long periods of time to deal drugs.

A cuckooed address is sometimes referred to as a ‘bando’ or a ‘spot’ by county lines gangs (Thurrock Council, 2020).

Cyber Exploitation

Children are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse through online platforms. Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the web, whether through social networks, playing online games or using mobile phones. Children and young people may experience cyberbullying, grooming, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or emotional abuse.

Children may be groomed and recruited into online criminal activity (cyber-crime) where their computer skills are exploited by a third party who stands to gain.

Cyber-crime can be split into two broad categories:

- Cyber-enabled crimes (such as fraud, the purchasing of illegal drugs and child sexual exploitation) can be conducted on or offline, but online may take place at unprecedented scale and speed.

- Cyber-dependent crimes (or 'pure' cyber-crimes) are offences that can only be committed using a computer, computer networks or other forms of information communications technology (ICT). An example of a cyber-dependent crime is gaining unauthorised access into someone's computer network, this can also be called 'hacking'.

Cyber Enabled crimes largely affect younger people, whereas Cyber Dependent crimes affect older people. Suspects for cyber-crime in general are young males.

Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

Child trafficking is a form of modern slavery and many children are trafficked into the UK from overseas, but children can also be trafficked from one part of the UK to another. Traffickers may use grooming techniques to gain the trust of a child, family or community. They may trick, force or persuade children to leave their homes.

Child trafficking can involve a network of organised criminals who recruit, transport and exploit children and young people within or across borders. Some people in the network might not be directly involved in trafficking a child but play a part in other ways – such as falsifying documents, bribery, owning or renting premises, or money laundering (Europol, 2011). As well as organised criminals, child trafficking can be organised by individuals and children's own families.

The Department of Education and the Home Office define Child trafficking as 'recruiting, moving, receiving and harbouring children for the purpose of exploitation'

Children are trafficked for a number of reasons including (but not limited to):

- child sexual exploitation
- criminal activity, including:
- cannabis cultivation
- street crime - such as pickpocketing, begging and bag theft
- Moving drugs
- Benefit fraud
- Immigration fraud
- Selling pirated goods, such as DVDs
- Forced marriage
- Domestic servitude, including cleaning, childcare and cooking
- forced labour, including working in restaurants, nail bars, factories and agriculture
- Illegal adoption
- Unreported private fostering arrangements (for any exploitative purpose).

Radicalisation and Extremism

Children can be exposed to different views and receive information from various sources. Some of these views may be considered radical or extreme.

Radicalisation is the process through which a person comes to support or be involved in extremist ideologies. It can result in a person becoming drawn into terrorism and is in itself a form of harm.

Extremism is vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. It includes calls for the death of members of the British armed forces (HM Government, 2011).

Children and young people can be radicalised in different ways:

- They can be groomed either online or in person by people seeking to draw them into extremist activity. Older children or young people might be radicalised over the internet or through the influence of their peer network – in this instance their parents might not know about this or feel powerless to stop their child's radicalisation;
- They can be groomed by family members who hold harmful, extreme beliefs, including parents/carers and siblings who live with the child and/or person(s) who live outside the family home but have an influence over the child's life;
- They can be exposed to violent, anti-social, extremist imagery, rhetoric and writings which can lead to the development of a distorted world view in which extremist ideology seems reasonable. In this way they are not being individually targeted but are the victims of propaganda, which seeks to radicalise.

A common feature of radicalisation is that the child or young person does not recognise the exploitative nature of what is happening and does not see himself or herself as a victim of grooming or exploitation. The harm children and young people can experience ranges from a child adopting or complying with extreme views, which limits their social interaction and full engagement with their education, to young children being taken to war zones and older children being groomed for involvement in violence.

Dispelling the Myths of Child Exploitation

There are a number of myths that surround the exploitation of children, some of which the Swindon Safeguarding Partnership has sought to dispel within this guidance and are answered below. This list is not exhaustive and it is important to remember that any child can be at risk of exploitation and therefore, knowing the signs and how to disrupt the exploitation is of the utmost importance.

Myth: *Child Exploitation only happens to certain children, my child is not at risk.*

Truth: All children regardless of age, background or geographical location are at risk of exploitation. People that exploit children are experts at ensuring the abuse goes 'under the radar'. Only by knowing the signs of exploitation can we stop the abusers.

Myth: *Sexual Exploitation only happens to girls .*

Truth: It can and does happen to boys and young men. Boys and young men can also find it more difficult to talk to anybody about what is happening to them.

Myths: *Exploitation only happens to older children.*

Truth: The most common age of children being exploited is 15 and 16 however, children as young as 12 have also been exploited. Children are also used in the recruitment of younger children however, they do not always recognise they are being used in this way.

Myths: *Abusers are all men.*

Truth: Women can be abusers too. They may use different grooming methods but they are known to target boys and girls.

Signs of Online Exploitation

Most young people have online lives, just as real as their offline lives.. A post can go viral and reach millions of people worldwide overnight.. Any post, no matter what it is, is open to bullying, abuse and threats.

In The Children's Society report "Counting Lives: Responding to Children Who Are Criminally Exploited" (July 2019) Practitioners mention young people are approached through social media platforms to initially engage in County Lines models of exploitation. During Covid-19 restrictions, young people are spending more time online. There has been a national increase in perpetrators grooming young people online via social media and online gaming sites for both sexual and criminal exploitation.

What is online grooming and exploitation?

Online exploitation is when someone online uses their power to make a child do sexual or criminal things, either online or offline. Online grooming is when someone tricks and makes friends with a child online, often to exploit them, sexually or criminally.

Possible indicators of exploitation

Children and young people can have a lot going on in their lives and changes in behaviour can be one of many things however, there are certain changes that may highlight they may be being groomed or exploited online. These include:

- Talking about older or new friends they've met online
- Talking about gifts or money they have received online
- Becoming upset, withdrawn, secretive or distressed
- Having a new phone or more than one phone
- Receiving a large number of calls or messages
- Worried about being away from their phone
- Change in attitude towards the use of the computer and other smart devices such as spending more or less time on them
- Sexualised behaviour, language or an understanding of sex that is not appropriate for their age
- Spending more time away from home, going missing for periods of time or visiting places that they have no links with

Remember, if things do not feel or seem right, they probably are not.

How is Social Media used for Exploitation?

People that exploit children are clever at avoiding detection and changing their methods regularly. By knowing some of the common terminology used on social media and how various platforms are used to exploit children, parents and carers can be alert to the possible indicators of exploitation.

Use of Stories

A number of social media platforms have the ability to 'share' these stories and can consist of photos/videos being available to their followers/friends for a period, often around 24 hours. Depending on a person's security settings, these stories are not always limited to friends or followers and can be seen by anyone.

Drug dealers may use these stories to share photos and videos to glamorise their lifestyles by sharing photos and videos of cash, designer clothes or other expensive items.

Disappearing images/videos







Images and videos shared on some platforms have the ability to disappear after the recipient has viewed them. This can make it difficult to capture evidence

Use of hashtags

The use of hashtags mean that individuals can search for specific terms linked to drug use and can find an account to purchase from in minutes. Outright searches for drugs are banned; however, users can still search slang that will go undetected.

Use of emoji's

Emoji's have opened up a new way to communicate and are used to mask and hide language that is linked to drugs, violence and sexual activity online. Some examples are included below

Emoji	Alternative meaning
	A snowflake emoji can also represent cocaine
	An eight ball emoji can represent an eighth of a drug
	An okay sign and finger pointing emoji can also represent sex
	A plug emoji can also represent a drug dealer or a 'link' or
	A broccoli emoji can also represent marijuana
	An aubergine emoji can also represent a penis

There are a number of useful resources, which can help with translating alternative meanings to emoji's on the [Safeguarding Hub Website](#)

Prevention and Disruption

Whilst people that exploit children often change their tactics regularly, there are things that can support parents and carers to enable the prevention and disruption of exploitation. Many social media platforms and apps have features in place to disrupt and prevent the use of their product being used in the exploitation of children and young people.

Safety features

Many social media platforms and apps have safety features in place to protect children and young people. Many of which can be found in the FAQs section of the website or app. The UK Safer Internet Centre has a [resource section](#) detailing popular social media safety features including Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and more. Net-aware.org.uk also provides a useful resource on websites and apps children are using. It is also important to ensure web browsers have appropriate safety features in place to stop children accessing inappropriate material. More information on individual web browsers can be found [here](#).

Open conversations

It is important to talk to children regularly about staying safe online. A good way to start positive family conversations is by having a family agreement on expectations and boundaries regarding internet use. The UK Safer Internet Centre has produced this [example agreement](#) for families.

It can feel uncomfortable to have these conversations with children so it may help to start with some simple discussions such as what websites do you enjoy using? How do you keep yourself safe online? Where would you go for help if something you saw or heard online upset you or made you feel unsafe?

Consider the purpose of any discussion you start with your child, and use this to guide the direction it takes. There are appropriate ways to approach all online safety topics with different ages. For example, with a teenager, nude images can be spoken about in wider conversations around consent and healthy relationships. For younger children, you could discuss what types of images are okay to share online, and what areas of our bodies are private.

Understand their devices

Technology is developing at a rapid rate and new devices are being released regularly which can be hard to keep up with. By understanding what your child's devices can do can empower parents and carers with the knowledge they need to support children to use the technology safely and responsibly. You can find out more about what devices are being used, what they do, introducing them in a safe way and more by clicking [here](#).

Know the age limits

Most of the popular social media services require users to be at least 13 years of age before they can register, although some sites are created especially for children under 13 (see Internet Matters' [Social networks made for children](#)).

The age requirements are there because of data protection laws. Online services are not allowed to collect or store children's personal information if they are under the age of 13. Data protection laws also say that only children aged 13 and over can sign up to online services without parental permission.

Following the age restrictions sets a good example for your child. Although the age requirement doesn't always mean the site is inappropriate for children to use, it's a good indication, especially for younger children.

Reporting concerns

If you're worried that your child is being groomed online or sexually exploited you should report your concerns to [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command](#) and the Police.

It is not always easy to spot the signs of online grooming and sexual exploitation so if you have any concern at all about someone your child is in contact with, you should get in touch.

You should always report if your child is or has been in contact with someone who is:

- Chatting online to your child about sex
- Asking them to do sexual things on webcam
- Asking to meet up if they've only met them online
- Requesting sexual pictures
- Forcing them into sexual activity
- Making them feel unsafe

If you come across criminal, sexual or obscene content on the internet, you should report it to the [Internet Watch Foundation](#)

If it is suspected or evidenced that a child or young person being exploited, contact Swindon MASH on 01793 466903 and the Police on 999.