

## 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](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/exploitsigns)

### FURTHER INFORMATION

**Title** Guide to safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation: Identification; response and prevention  
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#### 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.

##### 1. Mobile phones

- Increase in phone use or secretive use.
- Unexplained phone credit or new phone.

Abusers use mobile phones to command and control victims. They may present the phone as a gift. Abusers can use in-built GPS technology to track victims' whereabouts.

##### 2. Cars

- Being picked up or dropped off in cars by unknown adults.
- Speaking about car journeys with unknown adults.

Abusers may groom young people by offering to give them lifts in cars. They may cruise the streets in cars looking for young people.

##### 3. Sexualised behaviour

- Inappropriate sexualised behaviour; promiscuity; over-familiarity with strangers; sending sexualised images via internet.
- Sexual health problems.

Through sexualised behaviour young people may be acting out what has been done to them.

#### 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.

##### 4. Boyfriend/ New friends

- A significantly older "boyfriend" or "friend".

Gangs involved in exploitation will identify a young person and send a man, usually young, good-looking and charming, to strike up a relationship with them (see boyfriend model).

##### 5. Mood swings

- Mood swings or changes in emotional well-being.
- Becoming aggressive and disruptive or very quiet and withdrawn.

Young people who have been sexually exploited may experience, and exhibit, extreme mood swings as they struggle to deal with the impact of abuse

##### 6. Computer

- Spending more time, often excessive, periods online.
- Becoming increasingly secretive about time spent online.

Abusers may target children online, or via smartphones, encouraging them to send messages or even pictures of themselves.

##### 7. Gifts

- Appearing with unexplained new possessions, such as clothes, jewellery or mobile phones, that cannot plausibly be accounted for.

Abusers give victims gifts, buying first their friendship and later their affections, compliance and silence. (See boyfriend model)

##### 8. Drugs and alcohol

- Appearing under the influence of drugs, or alcohol, or possessing drugs or alcohol.
- Abusers introduce children to drugs and alcohol as a way of controlling them and creating dependency.

Child at risk

#### 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](http://www.safeandsoundderby.co.uk)
- Just Whistle: Provides bespoke training and seminars on sexual exploitation; [www.justwhistle.org.uk](http://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](http://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](http://www.nationalworkinggroup.org/resources)

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Carespace Debate: Motivational interviewing versus authoritative practice  
[www.communitycare.co.uk/MIVAP](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/MIVAP)

#### COMMUNITYcare CONFERENCES

Drug and Alcohol Misusing Parents, 15 September, London, [www.communitycareconferences.co.uk/misusingparents2011](http://www.communitycareconferences.co.uk/misusingparents2011)

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For more information on the Inform guide to young people and sexual health email [kim.poupart@rbi.co.uk](mailto:kim.poupart@rbi.co.uk)