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 to 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

FURTHER INFORMATION

Not an Inform user? Call Kim Poupard on 0208 652 4848 or visit www.inform.co.uk to find out more about Inform

Request a FREE TRIAL at www.inform.co.uk/free trialpage

www.communitycare.co.uk/exploitsigns

1. Mobile phones
   • Increase in phone use or secretive use
   • Unexplained phone credit or new phones
   • Abusers use mobile phones to command and control victims. They may present the phone as a gift. Abusers can use built-in GPS technology to track victim’s 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 cause 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.

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
   • 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.

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 them gifts for family and friends, that are unaccounted for, with no explanations, compliance and silence.

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.

9. Appearing for parties and shopping centres. A seemingly normal relationship develops but later turns abusive. Victims are required to attend parties and sleep with multiple men. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious organised activity can involve the buying and selling of young people.

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.

ABUSE MODEL 2

Boyfriend:

- Abuser gains victim by striking up a normal relationship with them, giving them gifts and meeting in cafes or shopping centres. A seemingly consensual sexual relationship develops but later turns abusive. Victims are required to attend parties and sleep with multiple men. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious organised activity can involve the buying and selling of young people.

ABUSE MODEL 3

Organised exploitation and trafficking:

- Victims are trafficked through criminal networks - often between towns and cities - and forced or coerced into sex with multiple men. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious organised activity can involve the buying and selling of young people.

Source: Barnardo’s, Safe and Sound Derby

Andy Cooper

For more information on the Inform guide www.communitycare.co.uk/MIvAP

Insight into this section

1. How best to chair local safeguarding children boards
2. A parenting assessment tool
3. How best to chair local information-sharing forums
4. Expert advice

RESOURCES

- Barnardo’s: The charity runs 22 specialist projects nationwide, including the Sexs (Sexual Exploitation of Children On The Streets) project in Stockton and Middlesbrough. For a list of services see report Report on a Sting to stop traffickers: 0208 652 4848 or visit www.justwhistle.org.uk
- Social workers have joined police, sexual health workers, NHS workers and the third sector to fight sexual exploitation in Blackpool with华润/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
- Just Whistle: Provides bespoke training and seminars on sexual exploitation; www.justwhistle.com
- National Working Group for sexually exploited children: The website has a comprehensive list of research studies and articles on sexual exploitation www.communitycare.co.uk/resources