Sexual exploitation: is it happening in your school?

It has been happening for centuries, and could even be present in your school in some form. Education safeguarding consultant Ann Marie Christian discusses sexual exploitation, and what schools can do to help.

When I was a young person at school in Year 11, there were a few girls who were blantly dating men in their early twenties. The men had cars and mopeds, and the girls felt very special and grown-up with no idea that they were being exploited; in fact, the word exploited wasn't really used by anyone to describe these relationships. The girls would show off their love bites and cheap gold rings given to them by these men, whisper or boast about their periods being late, and have regular pregnancy scares.

Young people today don't call it 'sexual exploitation' as they don't even realise it is happening to them. They think they are having a relationship; it's simply a game to play with older boys and men, or something to do to keep a relationship with them. Young people are bought gifts and told they are special. Dating older men sounds and feels exciting, and many girls feel they have to be secretive because their peers and families would frown on their actions and tell them they are being taken advantage of. Most of the girls believe that they are genuinely in love, and nobody can tell them otherwise.

In 1999, I was a school-based senior social worker in a secondary comprehensive school and there were loads of cases involving sexually exploited girls. From years 9 to 11 girls were very much at risk, and even some Year 7 girls were on the edge of involvement.

Case study one: self-blame for sexual exploitation

A very able Year 11 girl (12 GCSEs) disclosed after she attended my group session on self-esteem. She told me about a man who came to her home to fit a new kitchen. He was chatty and made her feel special and attractive. He even flirted with her, despite the fact that her mum was in the house at the time.

He managed to get the girl's mobile number (without her mum knowing!) and persuaded her to accept an invitation to his house to plait his hair. He texted her a few times, and she went to his house (obviously not expecting to have sex). He charmed and flattered her; no one had ever given her so much attention before. He started tickling and hugging her, and asked her if she trusted him - she said yes as she was enjoying his attention. He then pushed her on the bed and sexually assaulted her. She did not say 'sexually assault' - I did. She told me he had touched her body and they went on to have sex. She was a virgin and she felt uncomfortable about it afterwards, but did not realise she had been taken advantage of! She blamed herself until I labelled it as child sexual exploitation.

I told her I had to inform her mum, and that she was not to blame as she had been coerced. Her mum blamed herself as she assumed this man was trustworthy because he came from a large high street shop, and appeared to be kind and friendly. The girl's mum had no idea about the flirting, and was shocked when she had exchanged numbers and stayed in contact. After speaking to her mum, I referred the case to the police. She was 15 years old, and he was 26.

Case study two: disbelief of sexual exploitation

Another girl in the same school in Year 9 was dating her sister's boyfriend's younger brother. He was 24 and she was 14, but she had been dating him since she was 12 years old. He flirted with her for a period of time, then started texting her and arranged to meet her in the park by some swings. He told her he really liked her, and thought she was special and very grown-up for her age.

She was a very quiet girl from a middle-class family. Her father was an author, and her mother had her own business. Her sister had had a child with his brother, so they were in-laws. She was very much in love with him and couldn't see that he was taking advantage of her; she was convinced she was special and he was protecting her. I saw her for one-to-one sessions and she didn't tell me his age for a while; I had thought he was of a similar age as she was very convincing.

Eventually, she told me his age and the 'in-law' connection. She came to understand from our discussions that he was tricking her, and she told me that he had an 'official' girlfriend of a similar age to him. She was very jealous about this other girl and hated seeing the two together, but this made her want him more. This case was also referred to the police and told to her parents (who were horrified), but she did not cooperate and retracted her statements as she said she was still in love with him.

Recognising the signs

Schools see children five days a week and watch them grow up through early years, and then into adolescence. This regular contact with children and young people gives schools the opportunity to take positive action. Schools need to be extremely vigilant to understand and recognise the early indicators that young people are at risk of sexual exploitation. These are some things to watch for:
• It might start with minor disruption, truanting, mixing with the ‘naughty’ crowd, associating with older young people in and out of school.

• It may then develop into lying about their whereabouts, being late home and arriving late to school – sometimes leaving home very early for school and still arriving late at school.

• Their behaviour may change – they may become withdrawn and silent and appear preoccupied. They may become so focused on the older ‘boyfriend’ that they cannot concentrate.

• They may tell their parents they are on a sleepover at their friend’s house when actually they are out with an older man.

• They may end up staying out with someone in a hotel, B&B, or at a mate’s house where a bed is easily accessible. The older boy/man may not want his partner to find out and will not want to be traced.

• Once the girls are trapped in by the older boy’s/man’s attention they are given lots of demands:
  * skipping school to meet in the daytime (so no one gets suspicious)
  * substance misuse (to make them feel relaxed so they can accept their sexual advances)
  * carrying/transporting drugs (girls in uniform are less likely to be associated with drugs).

All girls are at risk, but some girls are seen as being easier targets:

• girls from strict families, as they are tempted by the sense of fun and secrecy

• girls who have special educational needs, as they may have low self-esteem and are less likely to challenge requests

• girls for whom English is a second language, as they may be desperate to blend in

• girls who do not fit a popular, cultural stereotype of beauty, as they can often feel left out and unattractive – being pursued by someone older can be flattering and great for the ego.

Case study three: sexual exploitation among boys

It is important to remember that boys are just as at risk of sexual exploitation. A Year 9 boy was befriended by an older man who appeared to be very trustworthy. The man listened to him and welcomed him into his group of friends. The boy was given cigarettes, alcohol, credit on his new phone, clothes, trainers and even a PlayStation. He was invited to the man’s home and stayed late, enjoying the relaxed environment with no boundaries or rules. He ended up staying over as it was too late to set off for home, and the older man couldn’t drive because he’d had too much to drink. The boy was offered the sofa and encouraged to sleep in his underwear. It developed from there.

In my experience, these boys rarely disclose, but their behaviours give strong clues, such as aggressive, offending or anti-social behaviour, absconding, self-harming, drug and alcohol dependency, and so on. These boys may end up in the Youth Justice Service and at PRUs.

The school’s role

School-based staff are in a good position to pick up on early signs and indicators. They can pull all their suspicions together and share their concerns with parents, children’s social care and the police.

Many young people will confide in a close friend, so it is important to establish a clear, ‘whistleblowing policy’ for young people to raise concerns about each other. Identify key members of staff whom young people can talk to in confidence if they are concerned about a friend. School councils are best placed to develop such a policy and ensure that it is well advertised around school.

We need to teach our young people life skills, including recognising when someone is taking advantage of them. We must help them to understand the difference between a healthy, genuine relationship and one that is coercive.

Use some of the resources available online, including short videos to get a discussion going. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre’s ‘ThinkUKnow’ site is excellent for this. There is also the ‘My Dangerous Loverboy’ website, and the government’s own site, ‘This is ABUSE’.

Find out about local services for sexually exploited young people, and invite representatives to your school. Many such services will have a ready-prepared set of resources that schools can use.

Sexual exploitation doesn’t just happen in certain locations, and isn’t always perpetrated by certain types of men. In all three case studies above, the perpetrators were white and ‘respectable’.

Have a look at the websites listed below, and get cracking!

• www.thinkuknow.co.uk is full of resources including short videos and lesson plans

• www.mydangerousloverboy.com tells the story of a young woman whose boyfriend sells her for sex

• http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk is designed to help young people recognise abusive relationships and their right to say ‘no’.

New briefings on neglect and grooming

The NSPCC has published two new briefings for schools on safeguarding - one on neglect and another on grooming.

The briefing on neglect states that staff need regular quality training and support to understand the nature and effects of neglect, so that they have the confidence to respond when they have concerns. Neglect can often be an indicator of further maltreatment and is often identified as an issue in serious case reviews as being present in circumstances leading to the death of the child or young person. Neglect can affect the child’s perception of themselves and the way others behave towards them; these children find it difficult to form relationships and, particularly in school, this can lead to bullying. They often have poor attendance, and consequently low attainment.

The briefing on protecting children and young people from grooming and entrapment points out that, by having a better understanding of the behaviour of sexual offenders, schools are better placed to put a number of obstacles in their way. Some believe that sexual abuse by teachers has dynamics similar to incest.

Both briefings can be found at: http://bit.ly/OjkAGG