

Meeting the Needs of Young People with Learning Disabilities who Experience, or are at Risk of, Sexual Exploitation

This research study; led by Coventry University, the Children's Society and Paradigm Research in partnership with Barnardo's and BILD; explores the needs of children and young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, child sexual exploitation (CSE). The study also included young people with autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), some of whom had a specific learning disability, while others had unmet learning needs which increased their vulnerabilities or had led to them being sexually exploited.

Although they share many of the same vulnerabilities to exploitation faced by all young people, there is clear evidence that young people with learning disabilities are more vulnerable to CSE than their non-disabled peers and also face multiple forms of often unrecorded abuse, such as monetary exploitation. They often face additional barriers to protection and to receiving support including professional failure to recognise their vulnerabilities; many are socially isolated and lack access to information and education on sex and relationships, they are often treated as child like without the same needs and desires as all young people and crucially, they lack empowerment and a voice.

Background

Authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and N Ireland are all required to implement and follow government guidance on safeguarding children with disabilities (DCSF 2009, Welsh Assembly 2011, Scottish Government 2010 & 2014, SBNI 2013), but although children with disabilities are recognised as particularly vulnerable, the implementation of local and national guidance into policy and practice is erratic and international obligations to protect children and young people from sexual exploitation and to protect the rights of disabled children and adults are not consistently implemented across the UK.

There are key gaps in national policy and guidance with regard to introducing compulsory sex and relationships education for all young people in every school and placing a clearer obligation on local areas and individual agencies to address the particular needs of young people with learning disabilities. Less than half of health and social care trusts (HSCTs) and local authorities have any specialist CSE provision and even where they do, many have no specialist provision for young people with learning disabilities.

Alongside the policy gaps there is a lack of professional knowledge around CSE and learning disabilities and of how best to meet the needs of vulnerable young people. In addition there are few specific awareness-raising activities for young people with learning disabilities and their families either at school or in the community and just a few local authorities or HSCT's have a CSE champion for young people with learning disabilities. Multi-agency working is critical to meeting the needs of these young people with learning disabilities, yet there is widespread variability in practice and little involvement of young people in developing multi-agency CSE services and strategies.

Collecting, Sharing and Using Information

Information sharing protocols between relevant agencies are at different stages of development around the UK and currently only a quarter of these include the need to share information around potential or known learning disabilities in a child. There is also a wide variety in the processes, systems and the criteria used to identify and record CSE and no shared terminology across professional boundaries which makes it difficult to identify how many young people with learning disabilities have experienced, or are at risk of, CSE across the UK. As a consequence this group of children and young people is often invisible within services and their needs are therefore not identified, mapped or addressed.

Young People's Views

Twenty-seven young people with learning disabilities were interviewed, aged from 12 to 23 years. Many of these young people had a current or past social worker, but most found their relationships with social workers difficult and often felt unable to talk to them. They felt that social care professionals had mixed levels of understanding and awareness around sexual exploitation and learning disability. They also said that their learning needs were often not met in school and this had a major impact on their lives; once again professional awareness and support regarding CSE was varied.

They had mixed experiences of responses from the police; it was helpful when their learning disability was recognised and their individual needs met and when the police worked in collaboration with the young person and their support worker, but it was common for the police and prosecution services to regard young people with learning disabilities as being unlikely to make good witnesses.

Experiences of Disclosing CSE

The majority of young people had never been asked whether they had been in exploitative or risky situations; some had talked to social workers about their experiences and had not been believed, others had disclosed the abuse they had experienced after receiving support or, less frequently, to a parent. Disclosure to a professional had, in most cases, taken time and only occurred once a long-term relationship had been built with one worker, usually from a specialist CSE service.

Three main factors appear to be at play for young people around disclosure:

- They do not understand, recognise or accept that they are being sexually exploited;

- They are worried about the consequences of telling somebody;
- There is no one who they feel confident will listen to them, believe them and whom they can trust.

Young people with learning disabilities may also have a range of other needs relating to their mental health, social isolation, therapeutic support and access to other support services. The research identified four key areas where improvements could be made to reduce risk and improve support; firstly better education and information on sex and relationships and exploitation; secondly, earlier, child-centred general support for young people so that issues do not escalate and create risk, this includes being listened to by professionals; thirdly, improved support to meet their specific learning impairment needs and finally, access to more CSE services.

Education and information

Many children with learning disabilities have never had a formal diagnosis or an assessment of need; this can lead to frustration at home and school and challenging behaviour which can then result in exclusion or disengagement from education. Sometimes the focus on dealing with challenging behaviours has meant that indicators of a learning disability and CSE have been missed.

There are a number of areas where schools could do more to teach children about specific areas such as:

- Grooming, abuse and exploitation;
- How to keep safe in the 'real world' and on the internet;
- Safe and positive relationships;
- Where to go if they need help and support in areas such as their sexual health or sexuality or if they have concerns about their safety and welfare.

Children and young people with learning disabilities who are placed in residential care across the UK are particularly vulnerable and careful consideration should be given to effective safeguarding measures to protect them from being sexually exploited.

Specialist CSE Services

It emerges that a significant number of young people known to CSE services have moderate or mild learning disabilities or learning difficulties and, in particular, autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These young people are often not known to any services before referral and have not had access to any support.

Specialist CSE services can work with young people around a number of key areas including:

- Increased recognition & understanding of the risks of CSE;
- Recognising healthy relationships & friendships, keeping safe, considering consequences;
- Improved relationships with family;

- Better mental, physical and sexual health;
- Engaging with education, planning for the future & moving into paid employment.

Issues Relating to Diversity

There is a clear need for further exploration of diversity issues among young people with learning disabilities which meets their needs in relation to sexual identity, which addresses the lack of referrals from black and minority ethnic communities to specialist CSE services, which does not overlook girls and young women with ASC and which recognises that boys and young men with learning disabilities are also at risk of being, and are being, sexually exploited.

The evidence from this study shows that unless attention is given to the additional barriers and issues faced by this group, their sexual exploitation will remain invisible and continue. The report makes a number of specific recommendations for policy and practice across the UK.

References

Franklin, A; Raws, P & Smeaton, E: *Unprotected, Overprotected: Meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation*
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<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/>

Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation - Supplementary guidance to Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under The Children Act 2004
<http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dhss/publications/policy/110107guidanceen.pdf>

The SERAF framework and approach to assessment was originally developed and used by Barnardo's Cymru, but was then endorsed and rolled out across Wales as a way for all professionals to make initial assessments of potential risk of CSE for an individual young person.
http://www.barnardos.org.uk/barnardo_s_cymru_sexual_exploitation_risk_assessment_framework_report_-_english_version-2.pdf

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