ESCAPELINE
Preventing Child Exploitation

Child Exploitation & County Lines

A Guide for Parents, Families and Carers

EDUCATING CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS.
EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES WITH KNOWLEDGE AND STRATEGIES.
PREVENTING EXPLOITATION.

www.escapeline.org.uk



SUPPORTING OUR PARENTS

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Parents are the lifelong advocates for their children's happiness and safety. Escapeline recognise this commitment and want to ensure that parents and carers, as well as our young people, are offered compassionate, well-informed and non-judgemental advice.



OUR GUIDE

If you suspect your child or a child in your care is being exploited, this guide will help you:

- Spot the early signs of exploitation
- Know the strategies that may limit your child's risk
- Work with police, schools and other services to protect your child
- Seek support and understand it is not your fault

50,000

CHILDREN

Recent figures suggest 50,000 children are involved in criminal gangs across the UK.

94.5%

INCREASE IN EXPLOITATION

Police figures derived from 2020 data recorded that 638 children under 18 claim to have been criminally exploited - a 94.5% increase from 2019.

75%

LIVE AT HOME

Contrary to common perceptions, 75% of children affected by child sexual exploitation live at home.

One parent's story

"Our son was brought up in typical, loving family. He had always struggled with friendships and was just desperate to be liked and accepted. He was 12 with learning difficulties. Suddenly, he had a new group of friends and started getting into trouble at school. He'd go missing from home as well as school, stay out late and he'd frequently not come home at all. He came home with gifts – not the big things that you hear about but small things like his favourite ice cream, sweets, cans of coke, pizza, weed. He would come home with bruises and burn marks, damage to his clothing and belongings. He was frightened, angry and on edge, he was unable to sleep at night and would only sleep during the day. He would receive unexplained phone calls and would be up, dressed and out within minutes of receiving that call. He got involved in anti-social behaviour and lots of trouble with the police. His attitude towards us changed; he went from a loving and affectionate boy to a stranger who is under the control of someone else."

CHILD EXPLOITATION

THE FACTS

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WHAT IS CHILD EXPLOITATION?

Child exploitation is the criminal and sexual exploitation of children for profit or gain, and is predominantly associated with the drug trade known as county lines.

Criminal exploitation involves the trafficking of children and young people across county lines to move and supply drugs, carry weapons and carry out other criminal acts such as burglary, violence and anti-social behaviour.

Sexual exploitation occurs when children are coerced into performing sexual acts as a means of intimidation and control, to pay off debts and when they are forced into relationships with prepetrators.

COUNTY LINES

County lines is used by criminal gangs as a drug dealing operation, transporting illegal drugs from big cities (e.g. London and Bristol) to smaller towns. County line activity results in increased levels of violence and weapons-related crimes.

IT IS NOT A LIFESTYLE CHOICE

Exploited children are not making a lifestyle choice. Methods of exploitation are sophisticated, manipulative and violent. Perpetrators will pinpoint a child's vulnerabilities and any boy or girl as young as 10 may be targeted.

EXPLOITED CHILDREN MAY FEEL TRAPPED

Exploited children are often not able to step away by choice; they feel trapped with no way out. They may be threatened and experience extreme violence and their families may also be intimidated. Exploitation through county lines is an act understood and defined under the Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Act.

BREAKING STEREOTYPES

Child exploitation is taking place in towns & villages across the country irrespective of wealth & location; it isn't confined to big cities or deprived areas, or one type of child.

Child Exploitation: The Stages of Recruitment

*There are **four distinct stages** that exploiters will use to recruit children and young people.*

It is vital to be aware of these stages of recruitment and the signs to look out for help to further protect the child or young person under your care from exploitation.

Targeting Stage



Who is vulnerable and an easy target?

Exploiters will target young people who they deem vulnerable as this reduces their chance of getting caught.

Exploiters will:

- Observe at skate parks, supermarkets, cafes, and advertise through social media.
- Figure out the young person's vulnerabilities, praying on those with separated parents, financial struggles, a lack of confidence, developmental disorders, mental health issues and disabilities.
- Use platforms such as Snapchat as a recruitment channel to glamourise the lifestyle, posting clips of children with expensive and appealing items.
- Gain the young person's trust and convince them of a seemingly wealthy lifestyle.

YOUNG PEOPLE 18+ ARE NO LONGER CONSIDERED MINORS. THIS HAS MADE THEM AN INCREASING TARGET FOR EXPLOITERS. LESS ATTENTION FROM SOCIAL WORKERS AND OTHER AGENCIES MEANS LESS POTENTIAL DETECTION. YOUNG PEOPLE OF *ALL AGES* ARE AT RISK.

Experiment Stage



Is the young person going to respond?

Exploiters are given a chance to test the young person to ensure their loyalty.

This is when exploiters will begin to:

- Provide gifts and rewards.
- Include them in activities and introduce them to other gang members and give that sense of belonging.
- Give weapons and offer protection and security
- Listen to the young person and provide advice, about family troubles, school troubles and struggles with their mental health, for example.
- Test the young person's loyalty by asking them to keep items in their posession such as money, or help them with small tasks.

THIS IS A CRUCIAL STAGE FOR SERVICES TO INTERVENE. AS EXPLOITERS ARE STILL IN THE PROCESS OF 'TRAINING' YOUNG PEOPLE, IT IS STILL POSSIBLE TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY EDUCATION AND REACH THE YOUNG PERSON.

Hooked Stage

How can we make the young person feel wanted?



This is the chance for the exploiters to provide this false sense of security; making the young people feel like 'part of the gang'.

Exploiters begin to escalate their demands and actions, such as:

- Allocating more responsibility, engaging them in drugs runs, asked to "keep watch" during meetings/pick ups and allowing them to hold onto larger sums of money.
- Asking the young person to recruit others.
- Giving the young person an identity in the gang.
- Continuing with gifts and offerings.
- Convince them to visit trap houses and engage in drugs, alcohol and sexual activities.

THIS IS A PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS GROOMING STAGE. THE YOUNG PERSON WILL BEGIN TO BELIEVE THEY ARE PART OF A FAMILY AND TRUST THEIR EXPLOITERS.

Trapped Stage

How can we continue this dependency?



Young victims will now begin to see the more unpleasant side of gang members.

At this stage exploiters will:

- Stage a fake mugging to trick the young person, putting them into 'fake debt' that they must pay back.
- Isolate the young person from their family, friends and other support networks.
- Involve the young person in consumption of Class A drugs.
- Physically and mentally abuse the young person through threatening behaviour and violence.
- Manipulate the young person by instilling fear and guilt.

THIS IS WHERE THE EXPLOITERS REVEAL THEIR TRUE INTENTIONS. THE YOUNG PERSON HAS BECOME DEPENDENT ON THEM AND FEELS THAT THERE IS NO WAY OUT.

EXPLOITATION & GROOMING

THE SIGNS

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BELONGINGS



Unexplained mobile phones, games console, money, clothes, bike, sweets, jewellery, cigarettes.

Multiple mobile phones and SIM cards, occasional money that can't be accounted for, belongings disappear or get sold.

CRIMINALS GROOM WITH GIFTS. THEY USE PHONES TO CONTROL AND SEND INSTRUCTIONS.

APPEARANCE AND TASTES



Exaggerated gang style, intense interest in money and expensive items, taking a keen interest in music that glorifies violence, misogyny & drug use.

Unkempt and dirty, poor self-care, no longer interested in their appearance.

CHILDREN WORK HARD TO FIT IN WITH PERPETRATORS BY MIMICKING THEIR BEHAVIOUR, CLOTHING & TASTE IN MUSIC.

RELATIONSHIPS



New friendships with controlling older children, new partner (usually older), secrecy about friends, existing relationships are dropped.

Relationships breakdown at home, school issues.

Cut off from family and friends, significant problems at school including missing days and exclusions, not appearing to care about anyone else.

CRIMINALS SEEK TO ISOLATE CHILDREN FROM FAMILY, FRIENDS & SUPPORT NETWORKS.

BEHAVIOUR



Confrontational, controlling, brittle over-confidence, secretive, unexplained absences, language seems different & out of character, some anti-social behaviour.

Distant, violent, out of control, hypervigilant, frequently missing, sometimes for long periods, constantly monitoring phone and disappearing in response to messages, run-ins with police.

ONCE TRAPPED, CHILDREN ARE CONTROLLED THROUGH EXTREME THREAT & VIOLENCE.

WELLBEING



A sense that something isn't right, disorganised sleep, tiredness, excessive time spent online, unusual smell.

Bruises & cuts, moving around awkwardly or painfully, depressed and lost, lack of appetite, under influence of drugs.

EXPLOITED CHILDREN ARE TRAUMATISED THROUGH VIOLENCE, CONTROL & ENFORCED DRUG ADDICTION.

TRAUMA

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A child or young person who has been exploited will likely suffer trauma.

Trauma is an emotional response to a deeply distressing event that can make it hard to cope with interactions. This trauma can change the young person's neurological development, which leads to engagement in high-risk behaviours and poor coping mechanisms such as substance misuse and self-harming.

FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE RESPONSE

→ These feelings can lead to the 'fight-flight-freeze' response being activated, which is the body's natural reaction to a potentially harmful event.

→ A traumatised person may be hypervigilant, which means that they are in a constant state of arousal, or they may dissociate.

FIGHT



- An overwhelmed young person can become *hyper-aroused*, which means that their nervous system is over-activated and it can leave them feeling agitated.
- They may lose contact with reality, raise their voice and become argumentative.
- These are not conscious responses.

FLIGHT



- Given the chance, the child may want to take themselves out of the situation and run away or leave the room.
- They may be desperate to be on their own and will not make eye contact.

FREEZE



- Children are often unable to fight or flee. This makes them more likely to freeze or dissociate when they are feeling overwhelmed.
- The child becomes *hypo-aroused* and they shut down. They may appear to be not distressed at all, which makes others believe that they are not affected by trauma.
- They may 'check out' when spoken to and may appear frozen and unable to think.

A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

It is vital for parents to be aware of the complex dynamics involved with prolonged exposure to trauma. It can result in problems trusting and forming supportive relationships, so communication with the young person requires a trusting, non-judgemental and understanding approach.

PARENTING STRATEGIES

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One of the main aims of the grooming process is to separate the child from the protective adults around them. Parenting strategies alone are not a solution to child exploitation, however, parental awareness and presence are protective factors.

A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

It can be difficult to start a conversation with your child when they are feeling overwhelmed or going through a difficult time. But engaging in trauma-informed conversations can guide you through the process.

Choose your time Try and identify that a child is becoming overwhelmed early. Notice if they go quiet, or become easily angry, agitated or argumentative. Give them some space if you find that the child is unable to effectively converse.
Let them choose It is important to allow the child to decide how much they want to discuss. They may return to share more later.
Empower them Exploited children often experience a power imbalance at the hands of the perpetrator, which causes trauma. Supporting the young person to talk in a way that is comfortable for them shares the power.
Remain calm Try to hold your emotions when communcating with your child. Do not get angry as this will push them further away.

COMMUNICATION

Be aware of your responses to your child's behaviours or emotions, and control your own feelings before talking. Use phrases such as:

- “I can hear from what you are saying that….”
- "That must have been frightening. Could you tell me a little bit about it?"
- "Do you want to talk about what's going on?"
- "If you need to talk to someone else too, I understand. Just know that I am here for you"

RESPONDING TO DISCLOSURE

Try to keep your emotions under control Disclosures can bring out a variety of emotions. Remaining calm and listening to their story will comfort them.
Listen without judgement When your child trusts you enough to disclose this information, assure that you believe them and listen with empathy.

HELPING YOURSELF THROUGH THE PROCESS

Supporting your child through trauma can be challenging and can be particularly difficult during times of crisis. Ensure that you are also caring for yourself by reaching out to support networks, including a trusted friend, family member, or talking with a counsellor. Contact Escapeline for family support.

WORKING WITH SERVICES

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If a child is being exploited, it is important to us that families and carers are *confident* working with the necessary services, and that they are aware of the steps required to ensure their child's safety.

IMPORTANT STEPS

REPORT IT

Report your child as a missing person every time they are expected home but do not return. Inform the police that you suspect your child is being exploited & trafficked.

RECORD IT

The type of information you need to record includes:



Dates and times when missing

Injuries or threat to wellbeing





Details of those they are associating with, such as locations, names, car registrations

Intimidation or threats toward family members



SHARE IT

Provide old and recent photographs of your child for comparison, details of their social media accounts, mobile phone number and bank details. These can help the police if your child goes missing.

TEAM UP

Talk to school staff and individuals who are involved in your child's life to help maintain safety.

SECURE IT

Keep your child's passport and other important documents safe, as well as any screenshots of messages that may provide evidence of your child being exploited.

STAY CALM

You are the key advocate for your child's safety. Working with services can be frustrating; try to to be polite and calm, but firm.

WHERE TO FIND HELP

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REPORTING CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

Support for parents who suspect their child is being criminally exploited

- **Crime Stoppers ~ 0800 555 111**
- **Childline ~ 0844 892 0220**
- **Escapeline Parent Support ~ 07707 897008**
- **Fearless ~ www.fearless.org**

REPORTING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Information and advice about sexual abuse, online grooming and gangs

- **NSPCC ~ 0808 800 5000**
- **Think U Know ~ www.thinkuknow.co.uk**

ADDICTION & MENTAL HEALTH

Confidential support & advice on drugs, alcohol or mental health issues

- **YoungMinds ~ 0808 802 5544**
- **Frank ~ 0300 1236600**

FOR THE YOUNG PERSON

Advice and support for young people to anonymously report crimes

- **Fearless Anonymity Promise ~ www.fearless.org**
- **Childline ~ 0844 892 0220**
- **Escapeline Support ~ www.escapeline.org.uk**

If you have concerns of an immediate risk to life, contact the emergency services on 999

PARENT SUPPORT

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OUR GOALS

It is essential that the health & wellbeing of both young people **and** parents are placed at the centre of our work. Below are some services, links and information to help in continuing your understanding of child exploitation, reminding you that you are not alone.

UNDERSTAND SOCIAL MEDIA



Becoming aware of social media platforms and how they are being utilised by your child can open up healthy discussions about their favourite apps and allow them to show you how they work.

For more information, please visit *YoungMinds*:
https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2451/social-media-a-guide-for-parents.pdf

HEAR STORIES

Hearing first-hand experiences from other parents and carers whose child has been exploited can offer that sense of relatability, and remind you that you are not alone. Escapeline can connect you to families who will share their experiences with you .

Visit the link below to follows *Alfie's Story- the journey of a boy through his experience of criminal exploitation:*
https://notinourcommunity.org/real_stories/film-lesson-alfies-story/

WATCH VIDEOS

Follow news stories and view information videos on You Tube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_Ny_aOWI-k

https://youtu.be/CN4gZ26zO7U

https://youtu.be/iQP5dwP_HIw

TRUST YOUR INSTINCT.
IF SOMETHING FEELS WRONG, REPORT IT.

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