

Child Sexual Exploitation Definition and Summary

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse in which a person(s), of any age takes advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity in return for something received by the child and/or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse.¹ As with other forms of child sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not undermine the abusive nature of the act.

Applying the definition: If someone takes advantage of an imbalance of power to get a child/young person to engage in sexual activity, it is CSE if:

1. The child/young person receives, or believes they will receive, something they need or want (tangible or intangible gain or the avoidance of harm) in exchange for the sexual activity.

AND/OR

2. The perpetrator/facilitator gains financial advantage or enhanced status or power from the abuse.

Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (money, drugs or alcohol, for example) and intangible rewards (status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection, for example). It is critical to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a child/young person does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a child who engages in sexual activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

Where the gain is solely on the part of the perpetrator/facilitator, it must be something more than sexual gratification to constitute CSE (as opposed to another form of sexual abuse). This could be money, other financial advantage (reduced cost drugs/alcohol or discharge of a debt for example), status or power.

CSE can take a variety of different forms (see examples in **Child Sexual Exploitation: Definition and Practitioner Briefing Paper**). It can take place in person or online and involve both contact and non-contact sexual activities. Although CSE is not a specific criminal offence in itself, it does encompass a range of sexual offences and other forms of serious criminal misconduct that can be used to disrupt and prosecute this form of abuse.

Any child under the age of eighteen, male or female, can be a victim of CSE, including those who can legally consent to have sex. The abuse most frequently impacts upon those of a post-primary age and can be perpetrated by adults or peers, on an individual or group basis.

¹ As outlined below

CSE can be difficult to identify. Many children and young people – and professionals – can misinterpret such experiences as consensual and fail to recognise the exploitation involved. This can contribute to misplaced feelings of loyalty or shame on the part of victims (many of whom will consequently not self-disclose) and a potential failure to identify abusive situations on the part of professionals. However, the fact that all such scenarios are typified by a power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse and/or some form of vulnerability or limited availability of choice on the part of the young person clearly delineates/distinguishes the experiences as abusive.

This document has been developed in partnership with the National Child Sexual Exploitation Working Group and written by Dr Helen Beckett and Joanne Walker from the University of Bedfordshire.



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