The secrets of child sexual exploitation

People might think that child sexual exploitation is a new phenomenon. But **Ann Marie Christian** says it has always been there and schools need to wise up to tackle it.

When I was a young person at school in the 5th Year (year 11) there were a few girls who were blatantly dating men in their early twenties. The guys had cars and mopeds and these girls felt very special and grown up. They had no idea they were being exploited. They would show off their love bites and cheap gold rings and boast about their periods being late and regular pregnancy scares.

Young people don't call it 'child sexual exploitation' as they don't even realise it's happening to them. They think they are having a relationship. To them it's a game you play in exchange for a relationship with older boys or men. They sense there's something exciting or illicit about their relationship and so they are discreet and avoid telling their friends and families. Most of the girls feel they are genuinely in love with these men and who are we to argue? Infatuation is a rite of passage and no-one can tell you anything different if you are in love! Is this sexual abuse, child prostitution, sexual exploitation,

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grooming? The boundaries of harmful sexual behaviour are unclear. To a degree all relationships have a degree of exchange about them. What is different about these girls?

The sexual exploitation of children and young people (CSE) under-18 is **defined** as that which:

"involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability' (Department for Education 2012).

The blame game

In 1999 I was a school based senior social worker in a secondary comprehensive school where there were a number of cases of girls who were sexually exploited. Most girls were in years 9-11, although some were as young as year 7. I remember one case in particular. A very able Year 11 girl with 12 GCSE's told me her story after a session I had run on self-esteem.

A guy came to fit a new kitchen that her mum had purchased from a leading store at her home. He was chatty and made her feel special and attractive. Her mum was in the home throughout the fitting while all this was going on. He managed to get the girl's mobile number without mum knowing and invited her to his house to plait his hair. He texted her a few times and eventually arranged for her to come to his house. She went there and did his hair. After they finished he started tickling her. She felt very flattered; no-one had ever given her so much attention before. He tickled and hugged her and asked her if she trusted him. When she said she did, he pushed her on the bed and sexually assaulted her, although she didn't use those words. She told me he pushed his hands between her legs and touched her body and they went on to have sex. She was a virgin.

The girl felt uncomfortable about the incident and blamed herself until I told she had been exploited. I told her I had to inform her mum and reassured her that she wasn't to blame. The same evening I told her mum who was shocked her daughter had exchanged numbers with the fitter and blamed herself. The matter was then referred to the police. She was 15 and 9 months and he was 26.

The power of secrecy

At the same school school there was a girl – let's call her Lorna - in Year 9 who was dating the younger brother of her sister's partner. Lorna's sister and her partner had a child, so there was a strong sense of connection and trust. Lorna had been dating her 'boyfriend' for two years, since she was 12 and he was 22. He flirted with her and texted her and arranged to meet her in the park by the swings where he told her he really liked her and thought she was special and very grown up for her age. She was a shy, quiet girl in a middle class family. She thought she was in love with him and would not accept that she had been exploited.

When she initially talked about him I had assumed that he was her age. Eventually she confessed his age to me and his connection to her family. She also said that she knew that he was lying to her as he had an official girlfriend his own age. Lorna was very jealous of her and hated seeing them together, but this made her want him more. I also referred this case to the police and told her horrified parents but Lorna refused to cooperate and retracted her statements.

The digital dimension

In the early part of this century I worked as a safeguarding advisor to schools for a local authority. It was there I witnessed the impact of the emerging digital world on sexual behaviour, assaults and bullying. The digital world removed some sexual activities from our physical environment to an invisible space. Schools were reporting girls being filmed performing oral sex to boys and being blackmailed to perform more or risk exposure on the internet. Girls were luring other girls into toilets to be sexually assaulted by groups of boys. Some girls were plied with drugs and alcohol and invited to 'parties'. These girls were porn-ready, with a distorted image of sexuality gleaned from the media in which females, girls and women are readily available. The same images of easily available porn corrupted boys' understanding of relationships.

I was a member of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, Sexual Exploitation and Young Runaway Subgroup. Strategy meetings were held. Children were put into care or secure units. But however shocking these cases were, the initial signs were not always immediately obvious. Most of these children had good school attendance until they reached crisis point. I interviewed young people to get a feel of the family relationships and lifestyle. Did the parents report them missing when they were absent? When were they last in school? Were their friends in school today? I would examine their general attitude and ask myself, was she sexually aware? was this a one-off? Are there any SEN issues?

Identifying the clues

Schools see children seven hours a day, five days a week. They know the children before, during and after puberty. They know their friends, families, lifestyles, and the child's habits. There are lots of positive actions schools could take. They need to be vigilant and not be persuaded by stereotypes: it's not only Asian men that are predators. Any one from any race, religion, class, of family can be involved.

However, there are some signs that a pupil may be exploited. Of course these signs do not inevitably mean that a child is being exploited, but they are useful clues.

Clues signalling possible sexual exploitation

1. Attendance

- internal truanting
- changing out of uniform before and after school
- absconding
- leaving home early and arriving late to school (or not al all)
- drop in school attendance
- fake absent letter
- not completing homework (lame excuses)

2. Relationships

- Sudden fall out with close friends
- lacking friends from the same age group
- low self esteem and self confidence
- chaotic lifestyle (at home and school)
- gang associated
- unsure about their sexuality
- sensible able girls suddenly rebelling and mixing with popular girls associated with boys

3. Behaviour

- compulsive lying
- sudden change in appearance - heavy make up, mature hairstyles
- girls that sofa surf between friends
- girls associated to repeated sexual rumours
- girls who have dated or hooked up with various boys in a short space of time
- self-harming (overdosing, alcohol, drugs)
- Anti-social behaviours
- victim of a sexual assault

The signs start with minor disruptions: internal truanting, mixing with the 'naughty' crowd, associating with older peers in and out of school. It then develops into lying about their whereabouts, being late home and late on arrival to school. Sometimes they leave home very early for school and still arrive late at school. They sometimes become withdrawn. They only brag to their close friends. They may tell their parents they are on a sleepover at their friends' houses when actually they are out being exploited. They often end up in a hotel, B&B, a mate's house where a bed is easily accessible because the guy usually has a partner already and doesn't want to be traced.

All girls are at potential risk but some girls are seen as easy targets. Girls from strict families are tempted by the sense of fun and secrecy. Girls with special educational needs have low self-esteem and may not challenge requests. Girls who speak English as a second language may be desperate to blend in and bow to peer pressure of feeling attracted and wanted by the opposite sex. The media portrays beauty as blonde hair, long legs, boobs and Caucasian skin and children of colour can often feel left out and unattractive. Being pursued by an older guy can be flattering and great for the ego.

Once the girls are caught they are controlled. Sometimes they are put under pressure to bunk off school so their 'boyfriends' can see them in the daytime (so no one gets suspicious), they are pressurised into substance misuse (to make them feel relaxed so they can accept their sexual advances) or forced to transport drugs for them.

Schools need to collect evidence and make contact with carers and parents to share their concerns about the change of behaviour and character of the child as soon as possible. Some of these girls are good at living double lives, geeky and obedient at home yet mischievous and reputable at school within their peer group.

What can schools do

Getting to understand the culture of children is important, as is keeping your ear to the ground. A checklist of precautions includes:

- understand the young people's slang, if you hear a word you're not familiar with check it on www.urban dictionary.com
- gain intelligence by talking to their peers/ friends indirectly
- listen out for gossip/rumours about young people, then clarify before informing the designated senior person for child protection at the school
- inform colleagues in school briefings to be vigilant (in and out of school) with particular young people, and if they hear anything to inform you confidentially
- promote 'looking out for each other' in tutorials or PSHE and encourage young people to see you confidentially if they are worried about a friend
- put posters in toilets and changing room
- install worry boxes around the school
- If you suspect exploitation is going on, contact the parent/carer and use the Common Assessment Framework to gain family story from birth

We need to teach our girls life skills too and values. They need to have a common sense approach starting with 'nothing in life is free' and 'if it seems too good to be true it's not true!'

Schools should introduce a clear whistle blowing policy for young people. It should be encouraged and led by the school councils and advertised in corridors and toilets. In all the cases I have known over the last 21 years, all the girls had confided in a close friend who was genuinely worried about them and unsure where to go to get help. The referrer should be spoken to confidentially and intelligence should be gathered to verify the concerns.

Policies need to be all-ecompassing (cross reference to articles in this edition on digital policies and LGBT policies) **whole school policies on sexual exploitation** and be cross referred to a child welfare policy and a policy which covers sexual, race, gender, homophobic and cyber bullying.

Making schools safer

This article deliberately focuses on the sexual exploitation of girls by men. But of course there are cases of exploitation by girls on girls and exploitation of boys. Although the contexts are different exploitation almost always uses a model in which an older or more powerful person gains trust and control over a more vulnerable person through gifts and flattery. Secrecy is a valuable currency and the more a young person can be isolated the easier it can be to exploit them.

Schools staff are aware that they have a very big issue that needs to be recognised and acted upon. Awareness of exploitation and what to do about it should be included in all safeguarding training. Most staff know about child protection and the categories of abuse, but we also need to be constantly keeping up with the times and reviewing and updating practice an policy. We know that some children are being sexually exploited by their so-called partner/friends. We know that when this happens someone knows about it or wants to talk about it but feels they can't. We know that this is often criminal and linked with other dangerous behaviours, and we know that the best form of protection is arming young people with the information and confidence they need to take control of their own decision. Let's start talking and accept that exploitation could be going on in our own schools. It doesn't just happen in Rochdale.

Knowledge Trails

Trafficked Children – There are many different ways children and teenagers can be exploited, and often, practitioners miss out on opportunities to identify abuse and put a stop to it. Lisa Nansy analyses Children's Society research to find out why.

Protecting children with a click – Hannah Bickers describes how the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) works to combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Further information

Useful Documents

1. "I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world". The office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation In Gangs and Groups. Interim Report, November 2012.
   http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_636

2. Safeguarding Children Abused through Sexual Exploitation. London Safeguarding Children Board. 2006.
   http://www.londoncp.co.uk/procedures/supp_6.html

3. Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation. Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children. Department of Children,Schools and Families. 2009
   https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00689-2009

Useful Websites

1. http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/sexual_abuse/
2. https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Safegauardingchildren/Page1
3. http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexual_exploitation_wda83207.html
4. http://www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_projects/sexual_exploitation.htm
5. http://www.beds.ac.uk/howtoapply/departments/appliedsocialstudies/staff/jenny-pearce

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