

Understanding the Child Sexual Exploitation of Boys and Young Men

This study by Barnardo's gathered evidence from practitioners and young people in Wales with a view to increasing our understanding of child sexual exploitation relating to boys and young men. Through interviews and focus groups they explored differences between the ways that boys and girls experience Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), ideas about what approaches or environments might feel safe enough for boys to start talking about these issues, the information and support boys might need to help them keep safe in relationships and the barriers to getting help.

What makes boys vulnerable to sexual exploitation?

- Negative experiences of care and family life;
- Social isolation;
- Running away, going missing and homelessness;
- Exploitation online.

1) Negative Experiences of Care and Family Life

Both boys and girls are made more vulnerable to sexual exploitation through experiences such as abuse and neglect in childhood, being brought up in families where substance misuse, domestic violence or mental ill health are common and not being safe in the home or in the community. As boys with these experiences move into adolescence, they are at risk of mental health problems, substance misuse, homelessness and offending behaviour and it is often one, or a combination, of these factors which makes boys vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

The Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (Public Health Wales NHS Trust 2015), shows that there is a relationship between negative early childhood experiences and health harming behaviours in adulthood, with men reporting higher levels of health harming and risky behaviours than women in relation to all of the behaviours including being both victims and perpetrators of violence, alcohol and drug abuse, incarceration and early sexual initiation. It may be that boys are exposed to more adverse childhood experiences overall or are perhaps less resilient or able to overcome the impact.

One of the most striking findings of this study is that more than double the number of boys had experienced early sexual initiation; that is sex before the age of 16; compared to girls, highlighting their risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

For boys and girls, being sexually abused as children can also create a vulnerability to sexual exploitation as they become adolescents, although boys seem to view their sexual abuse as children very differently to their sexual exploitation as older children and adolescents.

2) Social Isolation

Adolescents need peers and a sense of belonging for their emotional wellbeing and the development of their sense of personal identity and social status. Social isolation from peers and family adds to their vulnerability and often leads them into harmful situations. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) young people who experience high levels of discrimination and bullying, young people with a learning disability, lonely and isolated young people seeking contact via the internet where they take their vulnerabilities online, are all situations of social isolation which can lead to sexual exploitation.

3) Running Away, Going Missing and Homelessness

Running away, going missing and being out on the streets exposes young people, both boys and girls, to the risk of being sexually exploited. The missing person's data for England and Wales consistently shows the 12 to 17 age range with the highest number of people going missing. Many of these youngsters are forced to exchange sex for a roof, money or food, often referred to as survival sex. Both drugs and alcohol are used by perpetrators to ensnare young people in order to make victimisation and control easier, but it seems that girls are more likely to seek help for substance misuse much earlier than boys. Boys and young men with substance misuse problems are often drawn into criminal behaviour, particularly drug dealing, which can lead them further into networks of criminality. Within this environment, where they are at increased risk of contact with perpetrators of CSE, they may exchange sex for drugs or use sex as a way of paying off debts to drug dealers.

4) Exploitation Online

The internet and social media have the potential to increase these vulnerabilities considerably once youngsters enter the online environment, particularly where they lack the digital literacy to protect themselves, or the supervision and support of well-informed carers. In the online world there are increased opportunities for predators to trick, deceive and groom children and young people leading to abuse offline or online exploitation where the predator persuades, threatens or blackmails the child or young person to perform sexual acts, or to send sexually explicit images.

For a young person who is isolated from their peers the online world can be even riskier; trying to deal with difficult personal and emotional challenges without any offline support may easily expose them to exploitative individuals.

How are Boys Groomed?

Boys and girls are often groomed in similar ways, off or online; their emotional and situational vulnerabilities are tested and then exploited. In some cases it is their peers, both boys and girls, who groom through befriending and lure them into social circles where they are then sexually exploited by older men; in others it is an older man who initially takes on the role of mentor or role model. Sometimes the grooming is carried out by a mature female who initially offers affection and protection; and some boys are groomed by female predators, for instance female teachers.

Resistance and Denial in Boys

Male victims of CSE are far less likely than female victims to recognise or acknowledge their experiences as abusive in the short term; boys rarely disclose abuse, the abuse is played down or denied, they don't talk about being exploited and seem to develop an emotional detachment from their abusive experiences. Disclosures once made are often swiftly withdrawn or come much later on when young men access adult services. Where boys appear to be colluding with their abusers in criminal behaviour such as drug dealing and theft; this further blurs the boundaries in terms of culpability and blame.

The majority of abusers are male which, for boys, can lead to confusion about their sexuality and complex emotional responses, particularly when they have exchanged sex for something in which they have had some agency and control, such as money or drugs.

One of the key differences between boys and girls is that girls talk more readily about what has happened to them whereas boys are far less able to communicate verbally. Boys and young men say how difficult it is to speak about their experiences so:

- Acknowledge how hard it is for boys to come to terms with, and discuss, issues of sexual exploitation;
- Don't take negative, risky or antisocial behaviour at face value, be curious about what emotions and experiences are driving it;
- Think about ways to ask, to probe, such as questionnaires, or when to leave alone.

Barriers to Identifying and Supporting Boys and Young Men at Risk of Sexual Exploitation

It seems that the sexual exploitation of boys is being missed by frontline professionals, who may not recognise or fully understand the evidence of potential risks; this is further exacerbated by unhelpful stereotypes and professional attitudes such as the belief that males are better able to protect themselves, and are therefore at lower risk of abuse. While professionals and carers are more likely to see past girls' negative behaviour to the underlying causes, they are less able to do so in the case of boys and are more likely to consider boys as perpetrators of abuse rather than being the victims. Consequently there is a lack of early identification of male victims of CSE where boys are left until their behaviour takes them down a criminal route. Boys are generally seen as

being more resistant than girls to recognising and accepting that they have been sexually exploited and for this reason they need more time to establish trusting relationships with practitioners.

There is a strong view that boys are more likely to communicate emotional distress by externalising it in behaviour, rather than by internalising it or talking about their problems; with boys making fewer disclosures of abuse overall. Some do not disclose exploitation because they feel far more guilt associated with what they see as their own collusion in the exploitation than girls do, sometimes they just want to hold on to the benefits of exploitation or they fear the power of the abuser. Going missing is a high risk indicator for CSE among boys and girls yet this is often not taken as seriously if the missing young person is male. In the same way the illegality and risk to boys of relationships with older women is not widely understood or recognised.

The way that boys' behaviour is interpreted then has implications for whether or how they are referred to support services, with many boys who are victims of CSE ending up in the criminal justice system while girls are directed into children's services. Many male referrals to services for harmful sexual behaviour have previously experienced sexual abuse or sexual exploitation, but have only been referred for support when they become sexually aggressive.

Improvements to Services

There are a number of courses of action that would make a difference:

- Provide all boys and young men with access to good quality, gender balanced, healthy relationships education;
- Raise awareness among professionals and carers of the vulnerability of boys and young men, and the risks of exploitation they experience;
- Improve the opportunities for boys and young men to discuss the issues affecting male sexual development and sexual identity in safe and supportive environments;
- Improve the ways services engage with at-risk boys and young men, using a range of approaches;
- Improve the opportunities for gay, bisexual and questioning boys and young men to meet socially in safe, supportive environments.

Summary of Key Findings

Negative experiences of care and family life are known to create vulnerabilities which can lead to a higher risk of sexual exploitation as children become adolescents, for boys as well as girls.

There is concern among professionals that there may be more complacency when teenage boys go missing compared to girls, and that this explains discrepancies in reporting patterns.

Boys' routes into sexual exploitation are complicated and difficult to identify, as they are often closely aligned to criminal behaviour and/or substance misuse.

Boys are at risk of being groomed online, they can be groomed into sexual exploitation by older and younger men, older and younger women, and their peers, of both genders.

There is evidence that sexual stereotypes often play a part in the interpretation of boys' behaviour, with negative behaviour being taken at face value and not explored, or understood, as a potential response to trauma, as is more likely to be the case with girls.

Professionals are more likely to view boys as aggressors rather than victims, based on their behaviour.

There is evidence that professionals do not give some CSE risk indicators the same weight for boys as they do for girls.

Some boys are keenly affected by sexual stereotypes, and require a practice approach which actively avoids further disempowerment.

Heterosexual boys who have been exploited by males can experience confusion about their sexuality which induces guilt, fear and distress. This can represent a significant barrier to disclosure and seeking help.

Gay, bisexual or questioning boys who are made vulnerable through discrimination within their homes and communities can be at risk of entering same-sex relationships which are exploitative.

Boys with learning disabilities which reduce their ability to understand new or complex information, learn new skills and to cope independently are at increased risk of sexual exploitation.

CSE is currently viewed as an offence primarily affecting girls and young women, and this is a barrier to the identification of boys at risk of, or experiencing, CSE.

References

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