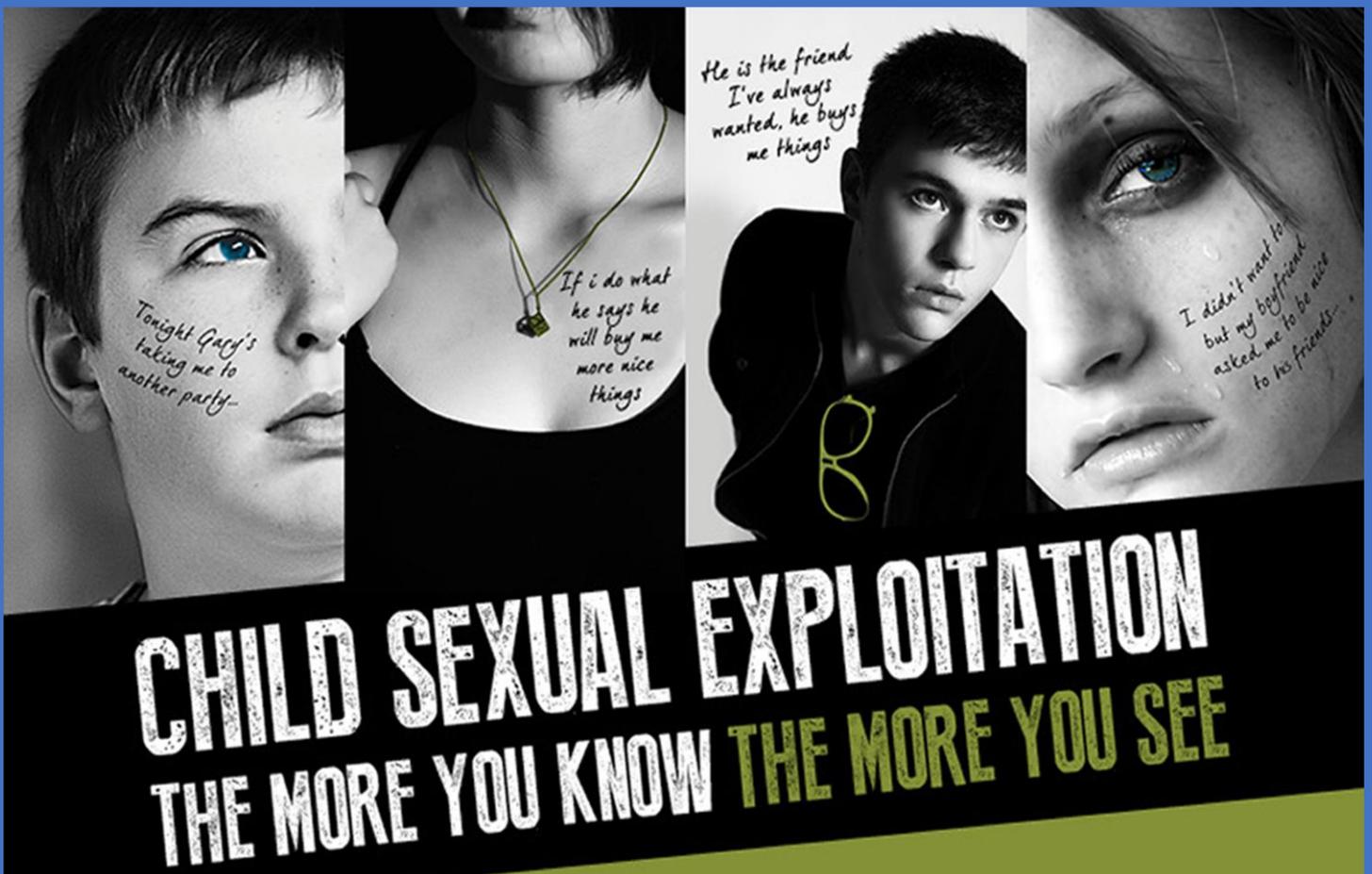


CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION GUIDANCE



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Introduction

The sexual exploitation of children always requires a child protection response. This is reflected in the [Edinburgh and Lothians Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures \(2023\)](#) and the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland \(2021\)](#).

Early intervention and protection of children, together with disruption and prosecution of perpetrators are the key features of an effective approach.

This guidance is designed to enable practitioners to recognise the signs of child sexual exploitation. All references in this guidance to children mean those under the age of 18, irrespective of whether they are living at home, with family, with carers, in a residential setting or independently.

1. Purpose of guidance

This guidance is to assist practitioners in recognising child sexual exploitation, protecting children who are at risk of or are abused through sexual exploitation.

The guidance supports West Lothian Child Protection Committee's Organised/Large scale CSE procedure and the Edinburgh and Lothians Child Protection Procedures. Everyone must take responsibility for protecting children from abuse and that means not only knowing your role, but also understanding the roles of other agencies and individuals.

This guidance should enable practitioners to:

- identify those at risk of being sexually exploited and intervene early;
- act to protect and promote the well-being of children who are being or are at risk of being sexually exploited;

Sometimes the background and experiences of children and young people who are exploited sexually impacts negatively on their behaviour, which may be challenging. The key principle for all practitioners is that children who are sexually exploited are the **victims of abuse**. The responsibility for their sexual exploitation lies with the abuser. The focus of police investigations and of prosecutions should be on those who coerce, exploit and abuse children.

What is child sexual exploitation?

2. Definition

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) 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. As with other forms of child sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not excuse or mitigate the abusive nature of the act.¹

Like other forms of sexual abuse, CSE:

- Is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse;
- Can involve coercion and/or enticement-based methods of compliance;
- Can still be abuse even if it is claimed the child consented – where the age of the child means they cannot legally give consent or the circumstances mean that agreement is not freely given.

The key factor that distinguishes cases of CSE from other forms of sexual abuse is the additional requirement for some form of exchange; the fact that the child and/or someone else receive something in return for the sexual activity:

¹ National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021

- Where the gain is on the part of the child, this can take the form of tangible or intangible rewards (for example: money, drugs, alcohol, status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection). Fear of what might happen if they do not comply can also be a significant influencing factor; in such situations the 'gain' for the child could be prevention of something negative, for example a child who engages in sexual activity in order to avoid harm to friends or family. The child is manipulated or forced into taking part in a sexual act. This could be as part of a seemingly consensual relationship or in return for attention, affection, money, drugs, alcohol or somewhere to stay. The child may think that their abuser is their friend, or even their boyfriend or girlfriend, but they will put them into dangerous situations, forcing the young person to do things they do not want to do.
- Where the gain is solely on the part of the perpetrator/facilitator, it must be something more than sexual gratification to fall within the sub-category of CSE. This could be money, other financial advantage (reduced cost drugs/alcohol or clearing a debt for example), status or power.

Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology such as phones, tablets, social media and gaming apps.

The abuser may be male or female. In all cases, those exploiting the child or young person will 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.

3. Who does it affect?

Any child under the age of 18 can experience CSE. While younger children also experience CSE, this form of abuse is most frequently documented amongst those of post-primary age, with the average age at which concerns are first identified being 12-15 years of age.

Children of any sex, sexual orientation, colour, ethnicity, ability/disability, religion can be sexually exploited. CSE can, and does, affect children and young people from all walks of life, with no obvious pre-identified vulnerabilities. No child is immune from this form of abuse.

4. Who are the abusers and how do they operate?

Those who sexually exploit children come from any ethnic, cultural or religious background. They could be anyone, they are predominantly male, but females can and do engage in child sexual exploitation.

They may act as individuals, in groups and in gangs and may also be known to the child either as a family member or friend. They may also be a stranger. Children can also engage in sexual exploitation of other children; this can sometimes be led by an adult but can sometimes be peer led.

Barnardo's identified four models of abuse:

1. **Inappropriate relationships:** usually involves one perpetrator who has inappropriate power or control over a child. There is often a significant age gap and the victim may believe they are in a loving relationship. Some perpetrators may be in positions of responsibility – such as teachers, religious leaders, sports coaches – and manipulate this in order to sexually exploit.
2. **Boyfriend/girlfriend:** A child is groomed by an adult to believe that they are in a loving relationship. The adult may entice, coerce or force the child to have sex with them and also with the adult's friends or associates. Peer exploitation is where children are forced or coerced into sexual activity by peers. Sometimes this can be associated with gang activity, but not always. Peer-on-peer exploitation can take place without the involvement of adults, or can involve adults exploiting children to exploit other children.

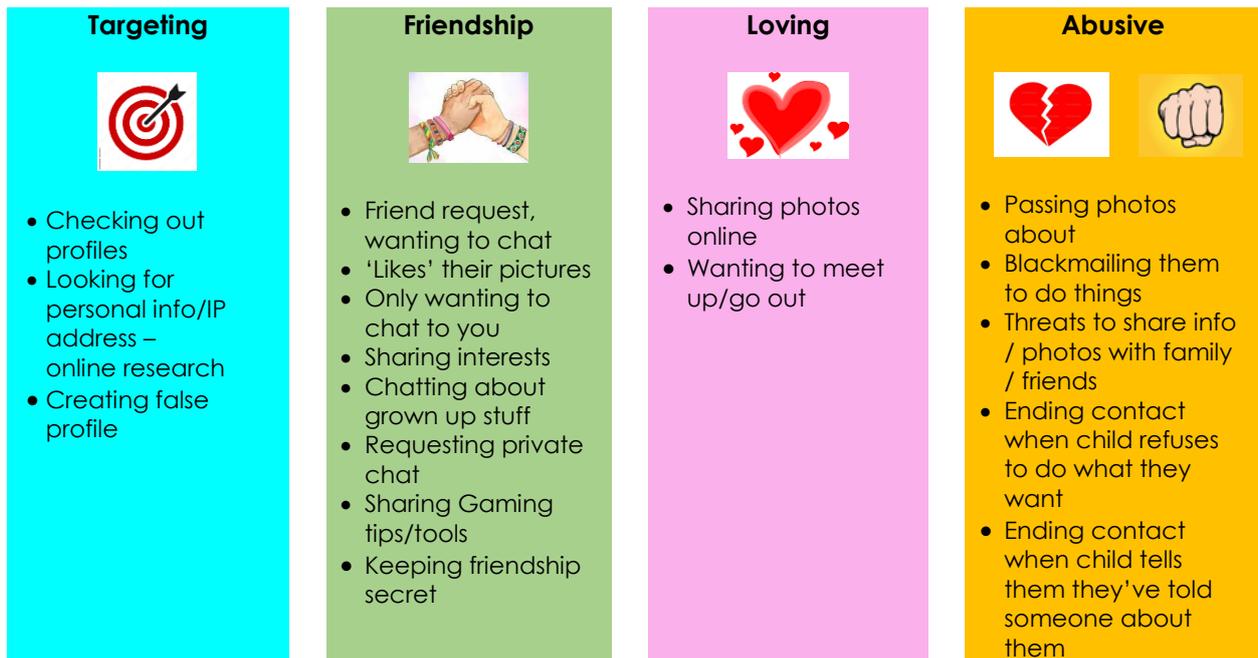
3. **Organised exploitation and trafficking:** victims are trafficked through networks, often between towns and cities, and can be forced or coerced into sex with multiple people. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious and organised criminal activity can involve the buying and selling of young people. The targeting of children by organised networks can lead to the child being exposed to more than one type of harm and exposure to adult and illegal behaviour.
4. **Technology:** child sexual exploitation can also happen online. Children who are exploited online may be targeted by adults who try to connect with them in a number of ways. This can be via social media apps, dating apps, chat rooms, gaming platforms. Just like exploitation that occurs offline, the child may not know that the person they are talking with is seeking to exploit them. The child may be tricked into sharing images of themselves or may agree to meet the person offline. Online and offline exploitation often overlap.

CSE can and does take place within families, although the majority of CSE is extrafamilial. Sometimes parents or family members can benefit financially through allowing or facilitating the sexual exploitation of their child. In such cases, the parents usually receive money or goods in return for someone sexually abusing their child.

4.1 Grooming

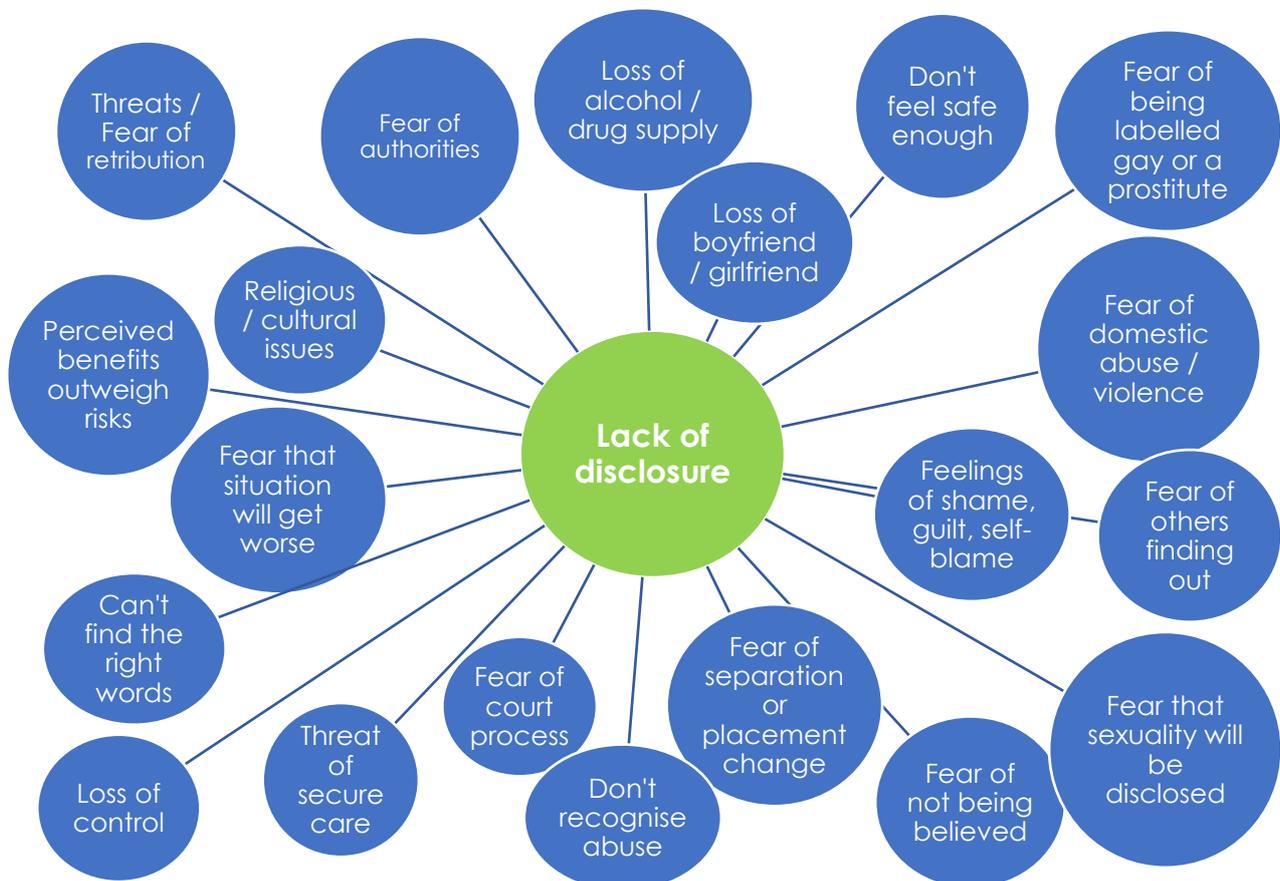
Targeting	Friendship	Loving	Abusive
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observing child Selecting child Befriending - caring, giving gifts, taking an interest, being nice, complimenting Gaining and developing trust Sharing child's info with other abusive adults 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making child feel special Giving gifts & rewards Spending time together Listening/remembering Keeping secrets Being there for them Being their best friend Offering protection Testing out physical contact – accidental touching 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being their boyfriend / girlfriend Establishing a sexual relationship Lowering their inhibitions e.g. showing pornography Forbidden activities – clubbing, drinking, drugs Being inconsistent – building up hope then punishing 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Becomes an "unloving" sexual relationship Withdrawal of love and friendship Reinforcing dependency – child is "damaged goods" Isolation from family & friends Trickery & manipulation – "you owe me" Threatening behavior Physical/sexual violence Making them have sex with other people Giving them drugs Playing on feelings of guilt & shame

4.2 Virtual Grooming



5. Why don't children tell?

Disclosure of any form of abuse is often difficult for children. The sophisticated process of grooming by abusing adults and the exchange element of this form of abuse can act as additional barriers, which increase denial and make disclosure especially difficult. The grooming process may be so effective that young people believe they are in a real relationship over which they have control.



Identification

Children at risk of sexual exploitation may find themselves in high risk situations, isolated from protective, nurturing adults. Children may be under pressure, intimidated, afraid or dependent on those who have exploited them, especially where substance misuse is a factor. Children may reject offers of help and support.

6. The Push and Pull of CSE

All children, from every background, are vulnerable to grooming and Child Sexual Exploitation. However, some children may be more vulnerable (Push factors) and targeted by abusers. Children may perceive benefits (Pull factors).

PUSH (Vulnerabilities)

- History of abuse/neglect
- Physical or learning disability/poor mental health
- Alienated from family/community
- Bereavement and loss
- Disrupted family life
- No or little adult support or guidance
- Looked after and accommodated
- Not attending school/trouble at school
- Drug/alcohol misuse
- Parents with mental health, drug/alcohol issues, learning disability
- Insecure immigration status
- History of disadvantage
- Low self-esteem/poor self-image
- Peer pressure
- Lack of awareness/understanding
- Environment: gangs, poverty, lack of resources

PULL (Perceived Benefits)

- Being liked/fancied by older person
- Someone thinks they are special (on line or in person)
- Receiving alcohol/drugs/presents/money
- Given lifts/taken places
- Excitement of risk taking/forbidden behaviour
- Parties
- Gang acceptance/initiation
- Sense of belonging
- Sense of independence
- Somewhere to stay where there are no rules/boundaries
- Acceptance
- Taken to adult entertainment venues

7. Warning Signs

Practitioners who have regular contact with children have a key role in understanding the connections between behaviour and the wider context of the child's life. Practitioners need to be professionally curious, look beyond presenting behaviour, avoid making assumptions and remain open minded.

There are a number of signs which practitioners should be curious and concerned about. Warning signs can include, but are not restricted to:



8. Challenges practitioners face in identifying and responding to sexual exploitation as a child protection issue:

- Age of the child or young person – responses can vary if the child is 16 years and over. Child Protection procedures apply to 16 and 17-year-olds and there should be a robust inter-agency response;
- Gender of the child or young person – responses can vary if the child is male. Practitioners should guard against making assumptions based on gender;
- Sexuality of the child or young person – responses can vary if workers are focused on the possibility of young people exploring their sexuality;
- Difficult behaviour of the child or young person;
- Scale of child sexual exploitation – some disclosures may seem implausible to workers;
- Children may be involved in other criminal activity;
- Lack of awareness on the part of the practitioner;
- Lack of disclosure – children do not see it as abusive or dangerous and trivialise or blame themselves.

9. Roles and responsibilities

Child sexual exploitation is a child protection issue - individual and agency roles and responsibilities are set out in the Edinburgh and Lothians Inter-Agency Child Protection Procedures (2023). In addition, the CPC's Organised/Large scale Child Sexual Exploitation Procedure (2024) should be referred to if there concerns about multiple victims or perpetrators.

Appendix 1 Policy and legislative context

[Edinburgh and Lothians Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures \(2023\)](#) reflect a collective commitment to multi-agency collaboration and joint responsibility, and will be followed by all services dealing with child protection concerns. For children and their families, these procedures set out what can be expected from the professionals who have a responsibility for their protection.

[The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#) is an international agreement, which protects the human rights of children under the age of 18. UNCRC is clear in articles 35 and 36 that the state shall protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, including 'prostitution', trafficking for sexual purposes and involvement in the production of child sexual abuse images.

[Getting it right for every child](#) provides a framework for all those who work with children and young people. The framework puts children and young people at the heart of service provision, as well as encouraging inter-agency working to ensure children and young people have the best start in life. The 'Lead Professional' is the person within the network of practitioners supporting the child and family who will make sure that all agencies act as a team and the help they offer fits together seamlessly to provide appropriate support.

[Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) makes grooming children for the purpose of sexual abuse a criminal offence.

[The National Risk Framework to support the Assessment of Children and Young People \(2012\)](#) is a national risk assessment toolkit for child protection to support practitioners in identifying and acting on child protection risks for children and young people. Based on the GIRFEC approach to well-being and on the National Practice Model, it sets out a process for assessing risk to enable practitioners to consider key factors in the child or young person's life. The factors include risk as well as resilience and protective issues. It can be used alongside any other assessment frameworks specifically designed to assess particular circumstances where children may be at risk of harm or abuse at home or in the community.

Appendix 2 Warning Signs and Vulnerabilities

The following list is not exhaustive but highlights indicators of risk and vulnerabilities potentially associated with sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. Information known about any of these issues should be shared when a referral is made.

Health	Present
Physical injuries such as bruising suggestive of either physical or sexual assault	Yes / No / Possibly
A sexually transmitted infection, particularly if it is recurring or there are multiple STIs	Yes / No / Possibly
Pregnancy / abortion / miscarriage	Yes / No / Possibly
Sexually risky behaviour	Yes / No / Possibly
Self-harming	Yes / No / Possibly
Thoughts of or attempted suicide	Yes / No / Possibly
Eating disorder	Yes / No / Possibly
Change in appearance including losing weight, putting on weight,	Yes / No / Possibly
Evidence of misuse of drugs/alcohol, including associated health problems	Yes / No / Possibly
Learning disability	Yes / No / Possibly
Children under 13 years asking for sexual health advice	Yes / No / Possibly
Numerous sexual partners	Yes / No / Possibly
Behaviour	
Sexually offending behaviour	Yes / No / Possibly
Truancy/disengagement with education, or considerable change in performance at school	Yes / No / Possibly
Volatile behaviour exhibiting extreme array of mood swings or abusive language which is unusual for the child	Yes / No / Possibly
Aggressive or violent, including to pets/animals	Yes / No / Possibly
Becoming angry, hostile if any suspicions or concerns about their activities are expressed	Yes / No / Possibly
Physical aggression towards parents, siblings, pets, teachers or peers	Yes / No / Possibly
Detachment from age-appropriate activities	Yes / No / Possibly
Secretive behaviour	Yes / No / Possibly
Known to be sexually active	Yes / No / Possibly
Low self-image, low self-esteem	Yes / No / Possibly
Young offender or anti-social behaviour	Yes / No / Possibly
Sexualised language	Yes / No / Possibly
Hostility in relationship with parents / carers and other family members	Yes / No / Possibly
Getting involved in petty crime such as shoplifting or stealing	Yes / No / Possibly
Disclosure of abuse and then retraction	Yes / No / Possibly
Grooming	
Entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults	Yes / No / Possibly
Inappropriate use of the Internet and forming relationships, particularly with adults, via the Internet. Note adults may pose as peers to entrap the child.	Yes / No / Possibly
Mobile phone being answered by unknown adult	Yes / No / Possibly
Accounts of social activities with no plausible explanation of the source of necessary funding	Yes / No / Possibly
Having keys to premises other than those they should have	Yes / No / Possibly

Possession of money with no plausible explanation	Yes / No / Possibly
Acquisition of expensive or sexual clothes, mobile phone or other possession without plausible explanation	Yes / No / Possibly
Having new mobile phone, several mobile phones, especially Blackberry or iPhone – (because messages cannot be traced).	Yes / No / Possibly
Always have credit on their mobile phones, despite having no access to money or having no credit so phone can only be used for incoming calls.	Yes / No / Possibly
Excessive use of mobile phones including receiving calls late at night	Yes / No / Possibly
Reports that the child / young person has been seen in places known to be used for sexual exploitation or prostitution	Yes / No / Possibly
Unexplained relationships with older adults	Yes / No / Possibly
Being taken to flats, houses or hotels and engaging in sexual activity	Yes / No / Possibly
Associating with other young people who are known to be sexually exploited, including in school	Yes / No / Possibly
Sexual relationship with a significantly older person	Yes / No / Possibly
Phone call, texts or letters from unknown adults	Yes / No / Possibly
Recruiting others into sexual exploitation	Yes / No / Possibly
Seen at public toilets known for cottaging or adult venues (pubs and clubs)	Yes / No / Possibly
Adults loitering outside the child/young person's usual place of residence or school	Yes / No / Possibly
Leaving home/care setting in clothing unusual for the individual child (inappropriate for age, borrowing clothing from older young people)	Yes / No / Possibly
Wearing an unusual amount of clothing (due to hiding more sexualised clothing underneath or hiding their body)	Yes / No / Possibly
Persistently missing, staying out overnight or returning late with no plausible explanation	Yes / No / Possibly
Returning after having been missing, looking well cared for in spite of having no known home base	Yes / No / Possibly
Returning after having been missing looking dirty, disheveled, tired, hungry, thirsty	Yes / No / Possibly
Missing for long periods, with no known home base and/or homeless	Yes / No / Possibly
Possession of excessive numbers of condoms	Yes / No / Possibly
New contacts with people outside of town	Yes / No / Possibly
Looked after children	
Living in residential care	Yes / No / Possibly
Frequently missing from placement	Yes / No / Possibly
Multiple Placement breakdown	Yes / No / Possibly
Going missing with other children	Yes / No / Possibly
Family and Social	
A family member or known associate working in the adult sex trade	Yes / No / Possibly
Unsure about their sexual orientation, or unable to disclose sexual orientation to their family	Yes / No / Possibly
History of physical, sexual and / or emotional abuse; neglect	Yes / No / Possibly
Witness to or involved in domestic violence at home	Yes / No / Possibly
Parental difficulties; drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, physical or learning difficulty. Being a young carer.	Yes / No / Possibly

Pattern of street homelessness or sofa surfing	Yes / No / Possibly
Living in hostel or B & B accommodation	Yes / No / Possibly
Conflict at home around boundaries, including staying out late.	Yes / No / Possibly
Recent bereavement or loss	Yes / No / Possibly
Gang association either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships	Yes / No / Possibly
Lacking friends their own age	Yes / No / Possibly
Lack of positive relationship with a protective or nurturing adult	Yes / No / Possibly
Living in a gang neighbourhood	Yes / No / Possibly
Presence of an older boyfriend or relationship with a controlling adult	Yes / No / Possibly
Abuse by boyfriend or controlling adult	Yes / No / Possibly
E-safety	
Evidence of sexual bullying and/or vulnerability through internet or social networking sites	Yes / No / Possibly
Concern that inappropriate images of a young person are being circulated via the internet/phones	Yes / No / Possibly
Exchanging inappropriate images for cash, credits or other items	Yes / No / Possibly
Receiving gifts through the post from someone the young person does not know	Yes / No / Possibly
Concern that a young person is being coerced to provide sexually explicit images	Yes / No / Possibly
Concern that a young person is being bribed by someone because of their inappropriate online activity	Yes / No / Possibly
Concern that a young person is selling sexual services via the Internet	Yes / No / Possibly
Accessing dating agencies via mobile phones	Yes / No / Possibly
Unexplained increased mobile phone / gaming credits	Yes / No / Possibly