



of the key foundations for supporting children with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE. It is important to ask children, their parents and carers and other professionals who are familiar with the child about what works best for that individual in relation to communication, understanding and learning. To support children's understanding, information should be broken into smaller parts and understanding checked frequently. The use of repetition and review may also be helpful.

### Supporting children with learning disabilities to disclose CSE

It can be very difficult for any child to disclose CSE. In some cases, a child may never make a disclosure of CSE. Sometimes children with learning disabilities do not disclose CSE or grooming because:

- they do not know it is illegal for an adult to have sex with a child or that it is illegal for someone to send them/make send explicit images;
- their abusers tell them not to tell anyone;
- no-one asks them about their sexual relationships or if they are being harmed or are at risk in any way.

### Recognising children's needs

It is important not to treat children in the same way because they share an impairment label. It is also necessary to consider the impact of a child's learning disability when assessing their need and design a needs-based response that includes their set of circumstances and their experiences of, or risk to, CSE.

### Communication

Understanding a child's communication needs is one

Disclosure is more likely to take place when a professional has proven to be trustworthy, patient and non-judgemental of the child, their experiences or actions. It is important that children with learning disabilities are listened to and believed when they disclose CSE or grooming. Providing an appropriate and positive response allows children to feel relieved and reassured that it is safe to tell others what is happening to them. Disclosure of CSE or grooming also allows responses to be set in place to meet children's needs and reduces escalation of risk of CSE.



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### Resources to support professionals

A practice guide supporting professionals to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE can be accessed at: [www.barnardos.org.uk/cse\\_ld\\_practice\\_guide.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cse_ld_practice_guide.pdf) or [www.bild.org.uk/information/unprotected-overprotected/](http://www.bild.org.uk/information/unprotected-overprotected/)

The Department of Education's guide outlining what actions should be taken if practitioners suspect a child is being sexually exploited can be accessed at: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/279511/step\\_by\\_step\\_guide.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279511/step_by_step_guide.pdf)

# Unprotected, Overprotected

Spot the Signs Leaflet for Professionals



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**This leaflet provides professionals working with children with learning disabilities and their families about child sexual exploitation (CSE). Any professional working with children with learning disabilities and their families have an important part to play in protecting children with learning disabilities from CSE.**

## CSE

CSE is a form of child sexual abuse (CSA) where a child under the age of 18 years old is manipulated, forced or coerced into taking part in a sexual act. What is specific about CSE is the concept of exchange where children who are abused or those abusing them receive something – for example, drugs, alcohol, affection – in return for

the abusive act. This element of exchange does not mean that the sex is consensual or that it is not abusive. Of note is children's limited availability of choice.

CSE can take many different forms. CSE can include, for example: abuse by an individual who has formed a 'seemingly consensual' relationship with a child; informal introductions to other abusers; the formal prostitution of a child; and the production and distribution of sexual images or exposure of the child to sexual images. Common to all forms of CSE is the imbalance of power in favour of the abuser and some degree of coercion, intimidation, violence and/or enticement of the child.

Grooming refers to actions undertaken with the aim of targeting, befriending and establishing a connection

with a child to lower their inhibitions in preparation for sexual exploitation.

## Children with learning disabilities

Any child can be at risk of CSE. Boys and girls from all ethnic backgrounds experience CSE and can be at risk. Children with learning disabilities, autism spectrum conditions (ASC) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can be more vulnerable to CSE than their non-disabled peers. This also applies to children whose learning disability, ASC or ADHD has not been assessed or diagnosed. This increased vulnerability to CSE can be due to children with learning disabilities having:

- a lack of access to information and education about sex, sexual relationships and CSE;
- impulsive behaviours and needs associated with a different understanding of social interaction and communication;
- experiences of social isolation and their search for friendships and relationships;
- limited capacity to consent to sexual activity;
- a lack of ability to recognise exploitation or risk.

Children with learning disabilities vulnerability

to CSE can also be due to a general lack of understanding that children with learning disabilities experience CSE and false perceptions that children with learning disabilities do not have the same needs and wishes to have sexual relationships as their non-disabled peers.

Children with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to be exploited by both peers and older adults and to online grooming and sexual exploitation. However, it is important to recognise that children with learning disabilities may experience CSE in other forms.

## Identifying CSE

As a professional working with children and their families, you may have the opportunity to identify that a child is at risk of CSE without their disclosure that grooming or sexual exploitation is taking place. It is important that you are aware of the possible signs that a child is experiencing, or at risk of, CSE. Possible signs that CSE may be taking place include<sup>1</sup>:

- living in a chaotic or

<sup>1</sup> As noted previously, any child can be at risk of CSE. While there are factors that can heighten vulnerability to CSE, it should also be noted that children who experience CSE may not have known vulnerability factors present. Similarly, the presence of vulnerability factors does not necessarily mean that a child will experience, or be at risk of, CSE

dysfunctional household that includes parental criminality, mental health issues, domestic violence and substance misuse

- history of abuse including familial CSA, risk of forced marriage, risk of honour-based violence, physical and emotional abuse and neglect
- bereavement or loss
- attending school with children who experience CSE
- friendships with other children who experience CSE

- lacking friends from the same age-group
- disengagement from education
- children questioning their sexual orientation or unable to disclose sexual exploitation to their families
- living in a gang neighbourhood
- low self-esteem or confidence.

Details of possible signs of CSE can be found at: [www.stop-cse.org/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/spot-signs/](http://www.stop-cse.org/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/spot-signs/)

