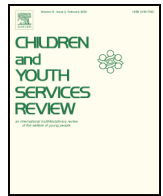




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Recognising and responding to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, child sexual exploitation in the UK

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, child sexual exploitation (CSE) has received considerable attention in the last few years, with evidence pointing to an increased risk for young people with learning disabilities. However, no study has specifically focused on this and little is known about how best to protect, identify or support this group. This paper is based on a UK study which examined the identification of, and support for sexual exploited young people with learning disabilities. Data collection included surveys of all local authorities in the UK and of a sample of services supporting vulnerable or disabled children, in-depth interviews with 34 professional stakeholders and with 27 young people with learning disabilities who were at risk of, or who had experienced CSE. This paper provides an overview of the study and identifies areas for improvement in policy and practice including the need for education, training and awareness raising amongst young people, their families and professionals; tackling social isolation, disempowerment and invisibility of young people with learning disabilities, and the need for full implementation of government guidance with a spotlight on this group of young people.

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1. Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse (CSA) involving children under the age of 18. Specific to CSE is the concept of exchange where children who are abused or the person, or persons, abusing them receive something in return for the abusive act. The abuse may be exchanged for drugs or alcohol, for example, or for affection. The element of exchange does not mean that the sex is consensual or that it is not abusive, in fact it can compound the abuse as children's needs are exploited and the exchange can be used to groom and control children. CSE can be perpetrated by male and female adults and children's peers and can affect children of any age, in both urban and rural settings and from all social backgrounds irrespective of gender and ethnicity. English guidance to safeguard children and young people from CSE states that:

'Child sexual exploitation can occur through use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no 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 or other resources.' (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009, p9).

1.1. Policy context

All four UK nations have developed specific guidance and/or action plans to safeguard children from sexual exploitation. Currently, the English government is updating its 2009 guidance to reflect the growing evidence base on CSE and in light of a number of high profile enquiries into failures by local authorities to protect children from sexual exploitation (see for example, Bedford, 2015; Jay, 2014; Coffey, 2014; Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, 2012). In Northern Ireland (NI), the issue of CSE was brought to the fore in 2011 (Beckett, 2011) and led to a subsequent independent enquiry and commitment to develop a coordinated and consistent multi-agency approach to tackle CSE (Marshall, 2014). Whilst learning disability is not specifically mentioned in the NI strategic plan, disabled children are noted as a priority group requiring protection from abuse (Safeguarding Board for

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Northern Ireland, 2013). Similarly in Scotland, the Scottish government instigated an inquiry into CSE in 2013. The inquiry report notes the:

'definite gap in knowledge about disabled children and young people in relation to child sexual exploitation'

(Scottish Government, 2014b, p28).

Following this, the Scottish Government published a refresh of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland with a separate section on CSE (Scottish Government, 2014a, 2014b). These guidelines contain a specific section on disabled children and have been further supplemented by the *Child Protection and Disability Toolkit (WithScotland, 2014)*. In 2014, the Scottish Government published *Scotland's National Action Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Exploitation*, however, this contains no reference to children with learning disabilities. Similarly, in 2011, the Welsh Assembly Government published their guidance on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation. This document identifies that children with 'special needs' are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and makes specific reference to young people aged 18 and over with learning disabilities:

'When a young person has a learning disability and is entitled to receive support via adult services, transition arrangements should take account of any risk to, history of or current abuse through CSE. Children's services should ensure that they draw any specific needs in relation to the young person's on-going safety and protection to the attention of colleagues in adults' services to enable on-going care plans to reflect these specific needs.'

(Welsh Assembly Government, 2011, p 38).

All of these UK government documents recognise that although any child may be at risk of sexual exploitation, disabled children may be particularly vulnerable, and/or that sexual exploitation can be related to other factors in the life of a child, including learning disabilities. Some of the guidance also note how perpetrators can target disabled children and that strategies, procedures and provision will need to be adapted to meet their particular needs (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009: p 39). This has led to the proliferation of risk assessment tools which include learning disability as a vulnerability factor (see for example: *Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, 2014*; *Sexual Exploitation and Risk Assessment Form (SERAF)*, Welsh Assembly Government, 2011; *NWG Network Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Risk Assessment Tool* (date unknown)). Although the evidence on which these risk assessment tools have been based has been the subject of scrutiny (Brown, Brady, & Franklin, 2016).

However, much of this is *guidance* for local authorities and therefore does not have a legal status. In light of this lack of statutory duty, implementation has been shown to be patchy. The way in which the English government 2009 statutory guidance has been implemented was the subject of a two-year research study which identified that only a quarter of local authorities had implemented any of the suggested guidance (Jago et al., 2011). Berelowitz et al. (2015), have also highlighted the deficiencies in implementing the guidance to protect children in gang-related child sexual exploitation.

1.2. Prevalence of CSE of disabled children

Although CSE can be by its very nature difficult to detect, a growing body of evidence has given some indication of the extent of CSE, the different forms it takes and its impact on victims in the UK. This literature highlights that often children with learning disabilities constitute a significant minority of sexually exploited children (Fox, 2016; Brodie & Pearce, 2012; Smeaton, 2009) and that children with learning disabilities or difficulties are at increased risk of CSE (Beckett, 2011; Smeaton, 2013; Berelowitz, Clifton, Firmin, Gulyurtlu, & Edwards, 2013).

Identification of CSE is exacerbated by children not necessarily being aware that they are being exploited and therefore not seeking support. Of course, the onus should not be on children to recognise their own abuse, all adults have a responsibility to protect children. However, the research evidence points to professionals' lack of awareness and knowledge of the indicators of CSE leading to the under recognition and recording of sexual exploitation at a local level. Different local assessment processes can also exacerbate the difficulties in estimating the extent of CSE on a national level. As noted by the *Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011)*, the lack of a single system to record and monitor CSE significantly undermines the possibility of building a national picture of the extent of CSE across the UK. Identifying within this the prevalence of children with learning disabilities is a further challenge. Processes do not necessarily record a disability and many children would not necessarily have a formal diagnosis, have undergone a formal assessment of their learning needs or met the high threshold for services; so information on learning disability might not be known or not recorded consistently or accurately.

The invisibility of disabled children within prevalence studies of abuse generally is common. In addition, disabled children are often treated as one homogenous group, making it difficult to establish accurately the prevalence of the abuse of children with learning disabilities or communication needs, for example. However, research has found that disabled children are more likely to be abused than their non-disabled peers. A meta-analysis of 17 studies of violence against disabled children (representing over 18,000 individuals) illustrates that this group is between three and four times more likely to experience violence than non-disabled children (Jones et al., 2012). For sexual violence, estimates of prevalence are 8–9%; however, when examining the prevalence of sexual violence in children with mental or intellectual disabilities specifically, the figure rises to 15%. Studies have also indicated that disabled children are less likely to disclose abuse and more likely to delay disclosure than their non-disabled peers (Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007).

1.3. Abuse of disabled children

In general, the quality and quantity of information on the abuse and protection of disabled children in the UK is poor. Evidence suggests that the increased vulnerability of disabled children is linked to:

- the lack of priority given to this group within local strategic arrangements to protect children (National Working Group on Safeguarding Disabled Children, 2016)
- the lack of attention given in practice guidance and supervision of workers to the increased vulnerability of disabled children to abuse (Taylor, Stalker, Fry, & Stewart, 2014)
- the reactions of professionals to the child, if they disclose, including disbelief and a failure of professionals to seek the views of disabled children (Miller & Brown, 2014; Taylor et al., 2014)
- lack of confidence amongst child protection practitioners working with disabled children, especially when the child has a communication impairment (Stalker, Lister, Lerpiniere, & McArthur, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014)
- professionals being too parent-focused and losing sight of the child (Taylor et al., 2014)
- variations in the thresholds that trigger a child protection response where disabled children are involved (Ofsted, 2012)
- services and support not understanding different types of impairment and associated support needs and in turn how this might affect a disabled child's risk of abuse and possible interventions (Taylor et al., 2014)
- a lack of sex and relationships education and awareness of abuse amongst disabled children and little attention placed on preventative work with this group (Taylor et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2015; Jones, Stalker, Franklin, Fry, & Cameron, 2016)

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