

**Be safe**  
**Believe in**  
**children**



**Barnardo's**



## **Help cut children and young people free from sexual exploitation**

Sexual exploitation affects thousands of children and young people across the UK every year. As someone who cares about children and young people, you could have an important role to play in protecting children from exploitation, helping to cut them free from this horrific form of child abuse.

### **What is child sexual exploitation?**

Sexual exploitation is a form of sexual abuse in which a young person 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 young person may think that their abuser is their friend, or even a boyfriend or girlfriend. But the abuser will put them into dangerous situations, forcing the young person to do things they don't want to do.

The abuser may physically or verbally threaten the young person or be violent towards them. They will control and manipulate them, and try to isolate them from friends and family.

## **Who does it affect?**

This type of abuse could happen to any young person from any background and can affect both young men and young women.

## **How does it happen?**

The victims of abuse are not at fault. Abusers are very clever in the way they manipulate and take advantage of the young people they abuse.

Barnardo's work with many young people who have been 'groomed' by an abusing adult who befriends them and makes them feel special by buying them gifts or giving them lots of attention. Young people may be targeted online or in person. Sexual exploitation can also occur between young people of a similar age.

In most cases, the abuser will have power of some kind over the young person. It may be that the abuser is older or more emotionally mature, physically stronger or in a position in which they are able to control the young person.

Some situations distance young people from those who would usually look after them, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Young people who are having difficulties at home, regularly go missing or have experienced care can be particularly vulnerable.



## **Grooming using the Internet and mobile technology**

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre has highlighted the use in recent years of technology to target and exploit children.

Since 2002, when Barnardo's first identified the use of the Internet in exploitation, concerns have continued to grow and this form of abuse was one of the prominent trends reported in a survey we conducted in 2009–2010.

Our services highlighted the increased use of the Internet and social networking sites for grooming and direct exploitation, as well as a significant rise in the use of mobile phones to target young people, alongside the use of texts and picture messages to groom and exploit.

We conducted a snapshot survey with 87 children aged nine to eleven during online-safety training in a primary school, and found that almost a third of them admitted to having met face-to-face someone whom they had previously met online.

Although this was only a small study, and therefore no concrete conclusions can be drawn from the findings, the number of very young children putting themselves, unwittingly, at extreme risk was alarmingly high.

Kay, a Barnardo's service manager in the north of England, refers to a 10-year-old girl who was referred to their project:

“ She was posting graphic, sexualised images of herself on the Internet. There is no doubt in my mind that the Internet is a serious tool being employed by abusers to target and exploit children ”



## What are the signs of sexual exploitation?

Children and young people who are victims of sexual exploitation often do not recognise or acknowledge that they are being exploited. However, there are a number of telltale signs that a child may be being groomed. These include:

- Going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late:
  - unhappy and lonely young people can be flattered and seduced by the attention of streetwise adults who appear to sympathise with them.
  
- Regularly missing school or not taking part in education:
  - young people who are not in school during the day may be more at risk of sexual exploitation; children who are becoming involved in this activity may begin to skip school or become disruptive.
  
- Unexplained gifts or new possessions:
  - children who appear to have new clothes, jewellery, mobile phones or money that cannot plausibly be accounted for.
  
- Associating with other young people involved in exploitation.
  
- Having older boyfriends or girlfriends.

- Suffering from sexually transmitted infections:
  - a history of unprotected sex may lead to sexually transmitted infections.
  
- Mood swings or changes in emotional well-being.
  
- Drug and alcohol misuse
  - this may leave children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and abusers may use drugs and alcohol to help control children.
  
- Displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour:
  - this may include being over-familiar with strangers or sending sexualised images via the internet or mobile phones.

There are additional signs that might indicate that a young person is a victim of complex or organised sexual exploitation. For example, they may describe being taken to different towns or districts, or they may be found in areas with which they have no known connection.



## **Sophie's story**

**I met him at a family party, he said he was 18.  
I later found he was 34 with a criminal record.**

Sophie is 16. She's bright, pretty and studying at college. One day she wants to be a child psychologist. But this girl's life could have been so very different, if it wasn't for the quick thinking of the police and some very intensive support from a Barnardo's specialist child sexual exploitation service.

The oldest of six children, Sophie grew up caring for her younger siblings and for her mother, who suffered from mental health issues. The family was too scared to ask for help, so Sophie struggled on, lonely and isolated, sacrificing her childhood.

**I had a lot to do at home and I admit, sometimes it felt lonely. I started to get into trouble at school for attendance and by the time I was 12, I began falling behind. I suppose I did feel isolated, I never seemed to get any attention at home.**

Typical of many young carers, Sophie craved attention and it was this vulnerability that would make her the perfect target for an abuser.



**I was 13 when I met him and it all seemed so exciting. I was invited to my cousin's 21st birthday party at her house and met this gorgeous guy. He said that he was 18 and we swapped telephone numbers – it seemed so innocent at first.**

The guy started calling Sophie regularly. He took her to the cinema, bought her thoughtful presents, 'daft bits of jewellery', and paid her the attention she had never experienced. Within weeks she was 'hooked' and there was no going back.

**At first he really treated me well and it felt so normal, so right. My mum was getting worried, but I didn't listen to her, I wouldn't have listened to anyone, I was totally in love. But then he started to change. He got more aggressive and bad things started happening. He'd hit me, but the next day say he was sorry. I'd always forgive him. He started taking me to parties, he'd give me drink and we'd stay out all night. It just got worse, worse, worse.**

Sophie was just 14. Her relationship with her mother was deteriorating rapidly, she wouldn't hear a word said against her 'boyfriend' and she had started to go missing for days on end.

Sophie was being dragged into a world of drugs, alcohol and sex. Still a child, lonely and in love, she was unable to resist.

**The parties got worse and so did the way he treated me. At first I'd fight back, but it was really hard. Then one night at a party, he took me... upstairs. He made me do things that I didn't want to do. I was frightened.**

At first Sophie had told her mother that she was staying over with friends. She regularly got grounded, but would then run away to be with her boyfriend. The grip he had over her life was terrifying – Sophie just couldn't see the danger she was in.

**Friends told me he was older, that he had a police record, but I wouldn't believe them. I called them a liar, I was still in love with him.**

But Sophie's regular episodes of running away hadn't gone unnoticed. Her mother had reported the incidents to the police and they became concerned at her relationship with the older man.

The police began an investigation, interviewed Sophie's friends and then alerted the local Barnardo's child sexual exploitation project.

**From then on, every time I went missing the project worker came out to me. She told me straight what he was doing and how it was not only me, but my family that was at risk. Gradually, I began to see what was happening – I realised the danger and that I needed to get out.**

With the help of Barnardo's, Sophie plucked up the courage to tell her abuser to leave her alone. It wasn't easy; he followed her, left messages and intimidated friends. But with the support of Barnardo's and the police she was able to escape.

**Barnardo's helped me realise what was happening and then they helped me escape. The worker helped me mend the broken relationship with my mum and get the whole family back on track.**

Sophie wants to use her experience to help others. She hopes to be a child psychologist one day and is working as a mentor to other young people at the Barnardo's project.

## **What you can do as someone who cares about children and young people.**

As a parent or carer, it is important to discuss with your child the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships to help highlight potential risks.

There are a number of basic practical steps you can take to protect your child:

- Stay alert to changes in behaviour or any physical signs of abuse such as bruising.
- Be aware of new, unexplained gifts or possessions and carefully monitoring any episodes of staying out late or not returning home.
- Exercise caution around older friends your child may have, or relationships that they may have with other young people who appear to have a strong influence over them.



## **You can take additional steps to help keep your child safe online: -**

The information below is available from:

[www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/internetsafety](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/internetsafety)

- Install Parental Controls software on your child's computer:
    - this software stops children from accessing inappropriate material. You can also restrict the amount of time they spend online or monitor which sites your children visit. Parental controls are available on mobiles and most games consoles. Talk to your child's mobile phone operator about filtering software to block inappropriate content and websites.
  
  - Download the ClickCEOP button into your browser toolbar to provide instant access to the latest internet safety information for parents and children
    - you can also report suspicious online or inappropriate behaviour direct to CEOP using the button
- [www.ceop.police.uk/Browser-Safety](http://www.ceop.police.uk/Browser-Safety)



- Understand your child's online habits:
  - what they enjoy doing, which sites they enjoy visiting, who they talk to and so on.
- Get online yourself:
  - the more you know about the Internet the better placed you will be to prevent your children coming to harm.

## **It is also useful to help your child understand how to keep safe online**

### **Here are some more things you can do:**

- Help your child to understand that personal details should never be shared with anyone online who they do not already know offline.
- Explain to your child what information about them is 'personal':
  - this includes their email address, mobile number, school name, sports club, home address, pictures of themselves, friends and family, arrangements for meeting friends, etc.
  - these small pieces of information can also be used to build a picture of their lives and daily activities. This can then be used to form a connection with the young person or even be used to locate and identify them.

- Help them to understand that they need to think carefully about what information and pictures they put on their profiles:
  - once images have been uploaded to the internet, they can be changed or shared by anyone.
- If your child uses social networking sites to communicate with friends, ensure they set their profile setting to private so that only their real friends can see their information.
- Make your children aware that it is very easy online for people to pretend to be something or someone they are not.
- Help them to understand why they should never meet with people they have only met online without being accompanied by an adult they know and trust.
- Tell your child that they can always talk to you or another trusted adult if they have any trouble on the Internet.

If you are concerned that your child is at risk of sexual exploitation, you may want to contact one of our specialist sexual exploitation services for advice:

**Call our supporter careline on 0800 008 7005 who will be able to find your nearest Barnardo's service.**

If your child is in immediate danger, call 999 or contact your local police.

There are other sources of help. These include:

**[NSPCC Child Protection Helpline: 0808 800 5000](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)**

The NSPCC Helpline is a service for adults who are concerned about the safety or welfare of a child.

**<http://www.ceop.police.uk>**

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre is the UK Law Enforcement government body dedicated to eradicating the online abuse of children.

**<http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk>**

This is the main UK government website providing advice for parents on how to keep children safe online.

## **Campaign with us**

Barnardo's has launched its "Cut them free" campaign to reduce the number of children experiencing the horror of sexual exploitation in the UK.

You can find out further information about sexual exploitation and show your support at:

**<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cutthemfree>**



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**Barnardo's**

**Tanners Lane, Barkingside, Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG**

**Supporter careline number 0800 008 7005**

**Email: [Supportercare@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:Supportercare@barnardos.org.uk)**

To protect the identities of those we work with, names have been changed and models have been used.

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