

# TDI *Explainer*

## What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

As a type of sexual offending and sexual harm there has been increasing attention on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in recent years. This Explainer covers what this is, and dispels some myths.

### What is 'Child Sexual Exploitation'

There are two elements to 'Child Sexual Exploitation', each with a legal definition:

A **child** is anyone under the age of 18. This includes 16 and 17 year-olds, who are above the legal age of consent. Children in foster care or residential care are legally 'looked after children', and their Local Authority has a duty to support them until they are 21.

**Sexual exploitation** occurs where someone uses their power over someone to coerce, manipulate or deceive them into sexual activity. This can be in exchange for something the victim wants or needs, and/or where the perpetrator gains financial advantage or increased status as a result of the activity.

Exploitation **does not have to be physical**, it could occur through the use of technology.

### Examples of child sexual exploitation

This may seem quite abstract (not least because all sexual abuse is exploitative in some way), so here are some examples of CSE to make things clearer:

1

A 44 year-old female poses as a 17 year-old female online and persuades a 12 year-old male to send her a sexual image, then threatens to tell his parents if he doesn't continue to send more explicit images.

2

A 14 year-old male gives a 17 year-old male oral sex because the older male has threatened to tell his parents he is gay if he refuses.

3

A 21 year old persuades his 17 year-old 'girlfriend' to have sex with his friends to pay off a drug debt.

4

A group of men bring two 17 year-old females to a hotel in another town and charge other men to have sex with them.

## What do we learn from these examples?

In the first three examples, the victim agreed to the sexual activity. This is not the same as 'wanting' that activity, though. The activity happened because of a power inequality between the perpetrator and the victim.

In examples 3 and 4, the principle offender does not commit the sexual act on the victim. They are exploiters because they gain from the act.

In example 3 (and to a lesser extent examples 1 and 2), the victim 'gains' something from the abuse—the 'love' of their 'boyfriend'. The exploiter is using a need the victim has to commit the abuse.

## Resolving some myths

So what is hopefully clear at this point is that 'consent' does not stop something being exploitation. It is not the victim's fault, even if they agreed to the sexual activity, even if they return to their exploiter, and even if they get something in return.

We should also note that there are no circumstances under which someone under 16 can consent to sexual activity—sexual activity with a child is always child sexual abuse. Children under 18 cannot consent to being trafficked for the purposes of their own exploitation. And regardless of age, no one can consent to sex if they are drunk, drugged or unconscious.

### **There is no such thing as 'child pornography', only images of child abuse**

Because children can't consent to sexual activity, there is no such thing as child pornography. Pornography and erotica can only be created by adults where they consent, free from coercion or manipulation, to the making of that image.

All images of children engaged in sexual activity are images of child sexual exploitation and behind every image is a victim who has suffered sexual abuse.

### **Further questions you might want to think about:**

Who is most at risk of child sexual exploitation? What are the signs of child sexual exploitation? How can we act to help prevent it?



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For over 25 years we have been at the forefront of the field, providing training, research, consultancy and public protection schemes to individuals and organisations across society.

If you've found this explainer useful, you may be interested in learning more through one of our training programmes. Contact us at [info@tdi.org.uk](mailto:info@tdi.org.uk) to find out more.