



**The  
Children's  
Society**

# **Child sexual exploitation and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities**

**The Children's Society  
Street Safe Lancashire  
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## Introduction

The Street Safe Team at The Children's Society (TCS) have worked with a number of young people presenting with learning disabilities (LD) and/or learning difficulties including Autism, who are at risk of or experiencing child sexual exploitation (CSE). This valuable experience provides insight into the additional risk factors and challenges in educating and supporting these young people. The team consists of CSE specialist support workers, missing from home project workers and, over 2015-16, a schools team delivering CSE preventative education. Research undertaken in 2013 into the link between CSE and young people going missing from home identified 17 out of 41 cases involved young people who self-identified as having some form of learning disability or difficulty. This report seeks to investigate this possible link between CSE and LD within Lancashire cases accessing TCS services.

## Background

The specialist support workers encounter a wide variation of young people and work flexibly and creatively to meet their individual needs providing long term support and intervention. The missing from home workers also encounter a wide variety of cases and complete very short term interventions, often one visit. They regularly see young people with LD who find themselves at risk, their work is brief yet preventative education can be delivered in the short time.

The Schools Project delivered CSE preventative sessions across Lancashire County Council maintained schools over a period of 18 months. The project delivered CSE training and support to over 8000 young people in schools, this included staff training, one to one sessions, small group work and assembly and whole class sessions. The team have delivered session to students as young as 5 years old up to the age of 18 years, category of schools include mainstream, special, short stay and pupil referral units. The purpose of this training was to support schools to deliver the education themselves in the future.

A small number of special schools have fully engaged with the project allowing us to gain an insight into young people at risk of CSE who have LD. Having also delivered staff training and parental awareness sessions in some of these schools, we have also been able to gain a better comprehend the level of understanding of all people involved and the challenges to protecting young people with LD. The uptake from special schools was considerably lower than mainstream.

*The term learning disability, in this case, is defined by;*

- a. a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills (impaired intelligence), with;*
- b. a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning);*
- c. which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development'*

*'Department of Health (2001)*

## Findings

We have completed an investigation into the role of learning disabilities in engaging young people in child sexual exploitation. This includes the methods of engaging children and young people and the identified theme/ motivation recorded for engaging in conversation or relationships with perpetrators. 19 cases have been identified as part of the study, all of which have accessed a Street Safe Service between 2013 and 2016. 13 accessed the specialist support, 6 missing from home and 3 are from the schools service. The age range of the young people is 12-21 years.

Nature of Disability/ Difficulty	Themes identified
Autism Spectrum Conditions, Mild and Moderate Learning Difficulties, Down's Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Fig. 1	Loneliness, frustration, management of stress and feelings, limited understanding of healthy relationships and consent, coping in mainstream, grieving, social interaction, isolation, acceptance and approval from peers, sexuality, self-harm and pornography.

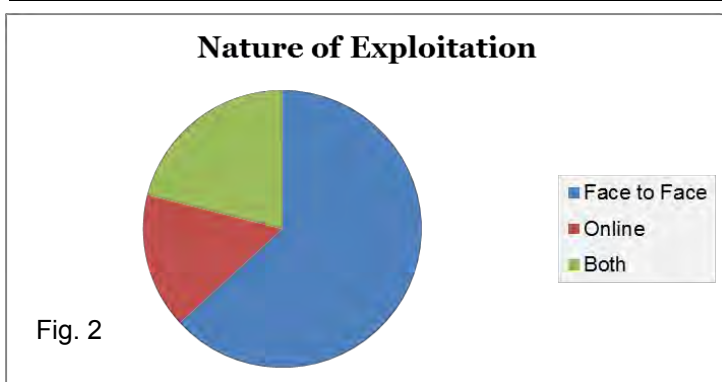


Fig. 2 demonstrates how children and young people (CYP) are targeted in the community and online, some research suggests that they may be more likely to be targeted online however the work delivered highlighted the false perception of people working closely with them, that these young people don't use social media or chat rooms.



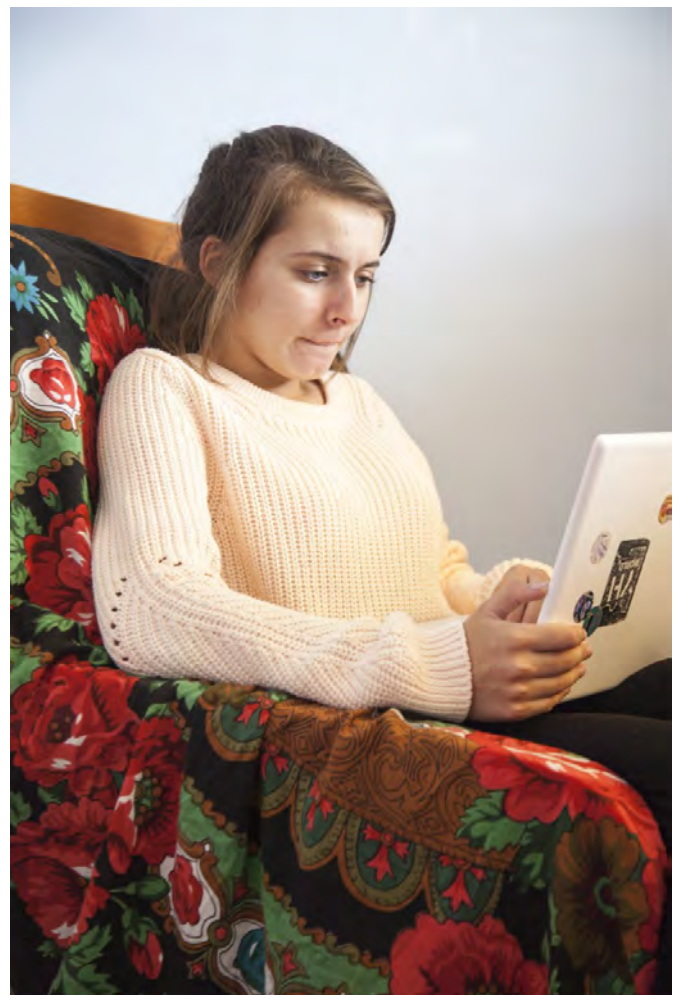
Fig. 3 shows how loneliness and isolation are playing a large part in the vulnerability of the young people. Innocence refers to their lack of understanding of healthy relationships, consent, sex and social interaction.

On completing the work in mainstream and special schools with young people with LD, we have identified that these young people are in many cases unprotected. Professionals and parents alike are keen to protect them and provide them with the education required yet there appears to be a fear of how to go about this; one professional stating that *"we have to be extra careful as some of these students will take it that we are telling them to go and do this"*. By working closely with professionals and parents we can identify the best way to inform the young people of the risks and ensure that the message is delivered at the correct level and is also regularly repeated. It is also vital to support parents to implement safety features at home, and educate them on the risks of apps and online tools that are available for young people.

Loneliness, the need for friendship and interaction features highly in the cases identified as does the ease of communication when using online tools when compared to having to build, and maintain relationships face to face. The absence of the successful friendships in real life is clearly identifiable in young people with LD, this is widely recognised in those with Autism however those with mild or moderate LD also find this difficult. Many of these young people attend mainstream education and are struggling to cope with the friendship element of this environment. They also fall prey to other young people targeting them to post inappropriate images and content online. In innocence they do this believing this will forge friendships with peers. The lack of awareness and inability to think through processes and consider consequences leads them to share far too much information. (See fig. 1 and 3).

At least 50% of the cases demonstrated how young people feeling lonely will actively seek friendship online or face to face. Some have already received education regarding the risks of this and some have not highlighting the importance of repeating the messages regularly and for parents to be more aware and have Internet safety tools in place.

Another key finding is the recording of LD across multi agency organisations. It has been a challenge to clearly identify cases where LD is present as there is more than one method of recording this. In some cases this hasn't been formally recorded as the project worker either hasn't had confirmation of the nature of the disability, there is no formal diagnosis or it wasn't thought to be relevant.



“I didn't need any special resources to talk to the group of boys with Autism about CSE, if I hadn't have done it we wouldn't have discovered that a few of them are using Tinder”.

**Specialist CSE Support Worker, Street Safe Lancashire.**

'Please rest assured that we have been truly grateful for your work and support and have in many meetings (Governors, multi-agency etc...) shared our positive experience of working with you in a special school setting. We have all had our expectations altered given the contact our young people have with certain internet, games and TV programmes.

I hope that we get to work together again in the near future, our young people have greatly benefited from your input and expertise.'

**Deputy Head, Ridgewood Community School, Burnley.**

"I've found the NSPCC 'PANTS' activity was enough to teach my daughter about appropriate touch until she was older, she had some sex education at school at aged 14 and she came home excited to have sex; I think it was too much too soon".

**Parent of a young person with Autism and learning difficulties.**

Recommendations	Challenges
Educate <i>all</i> young people about the risks of exploitation by delivering sessions on healthy relationships, online safety and the grooming line using a variety of teaching styles. Regularly repeat key messages.	A fear of traumatising young people and a lack of appropriate resources and guidance on delivering this work with students with LD.
Support parents to understand the risks and apply protective measures at home.	Difficulty in reaching parents and resourcing this level of support.
Provide opportunities for young people struggling with building and maintaining relationships to take part in online friendship groups in a controlled and safe environment. Educational opportunities to support them to find and access safe 'closed' groups of young people with similar interests.	Guidance and support for professionals/parents to provide this for young people. Fear of not providing enough protection for the young people in this environment. Resourcing and monitoring.
Ensure professionals share good practice, information and guidance with education professionals and parents to support them to stay up to date.	Scheduling regular opportunities to share information. Time and resources.
Work collaboratively across Lancashire to ensure that effective policy and guidance is implemented.	Communication and resources.
Provide appropriate and targeted sex education.	Assessing the current standard and creating, modifying resources and content to ensure it meets the needs of the young people as individuals.

## Local Responses

We have responded to the report published in September 2015, 'Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation', produced by Anita Franklin, Phil Raws and Emilie Smeaton. This stated that young people with learning disabilities are at risk of exploitation due the following factors;

### **A belief that they are not sexual beings and therefore do not feel the need for the same level of interaction as other young people (YP)-**

*The YP have reported that they want the same interaction as their peers, friends and relations and are sometimes just 'looking for a friend'. There are cases where young people with learning disabilities very much enjoy physical contact and will engage in regular inappropriate contact with anyone they have identified as 'willing'. Many do not currently receive adequate education around consent.*

### **Gaps in national policy and a lack of implementation of current guidance-**

*The lack of implementation due to the 'fear' factor around delivering these messages to children. Contextual knowledge and perception of the young people leads to an underestimation of the education necessary.*

### **'Overprotected' social isolation-**

*The young people we have worked with have not previously received any information regarding CSE due to professionals being unaware of how to safely and appropriately approach this subject and a lack of awareness among parents. There also appears to be a belief on the parents behalf that their children are protected at home; yet in most cases the CYP has access to the Internet and the parents are under the impression that they are not capable, or knowledgeable enough, to chat to strangers. Professionals and parent perspectives are very contextual. CYP do not see social media and gaming as 'using the Internet' or 'being online'.*

### **Lack of knowledge of CSE with the professionals working with the YP-**

*We have found that professionals are aware of the problem to varying extents yet require support to deliver the education. There was a general concern on how much the YP needed to know and what language should be used. Some professionals have suggested that it is enough to deliver healthy relationship education yet this is already covered in the curriculum in a proportion of schools; we believe that there is a need to clearly identify the risks and provide rules to support the CYP to stay safe.*

### **Negative responses at point of disclosure-**

*YP often have support from professionals on a much more one to one basis where LD is identified which may help with disclosing sensitive information. Challenges occur when the wider professional community such as police and other statutory services fail to make reasonable adjustments according to the young person's needs.*

**Suggested prevention strategies- robust and quality Sex Relationship Education and Personal Social and Health Education-**

*This needs to include a better understanding of CSE and specifically Internet Safety as the cases identified have often included an online element with the young people looking for friendship, companionship and sexual satisfaction, often communication starting online. This should, we feel, include greater opportunities for CYP with LD to build and maintain healthy friendships (including young people in mainstream schools who are isolated without adequate support). We believe the number of young people at risk on the Internet due to learning disabilities is greatly underestimated and not accurately recorded. Sex education is very important but a complicated concept for some within this group; a parent commented on “too much, too early leading to their child wanting sex”.*



**Professionals understanding of the ‘capacity to consent’ in young people with LD-**

*Some negative responses from the police in terms of blame. Some professionals lack understanding that they may have the capacity to understand what sex is but less capable than others to recognise when a person is genuine, safe or appropriate to be a relationship with, or that they have been groomed.*

**YP with LD are not always identified in local multi-agency arrangements for CSE –**

*LDD is not adequately recorded by organisations therefore the correct services are not put in place. Some services are delivering interventions yet this appears to be sporadic.*

“Often the key is to identify what the main problem is so you know what the key message is. Then plan all of the work around reinforcing that one message to ensure that it becomes second nature to the young person.”

**Specialist CSE Support Worker, Street Safe Lancashire.**

**It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.**

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs crucial local services and campaigns to change the law to help this country's most vulnerable children and young people.

## **Further information**

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## **References**

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