# Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

## Responding to disclosures of abuse and harm

# What do you need to know?

**Safeguarding**
*All Children Matter*

**Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership**

# Contents

# What do you need to know?

This 5-point Learning Brief has been developed following a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) that considered the multi-agency response around child sexual exploitation and intra-familial harm, and what happens when children (used to describe children and young people under 18 ) make disclosures of abuse and harm.

Its purpose is to share and highlight the learning themes from the review and provide the Key Messages.
Its aim is to reflect on what this means for practice and how multi-agency systems and practice can help children, and keep them safe.

## Learning Themes

Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews
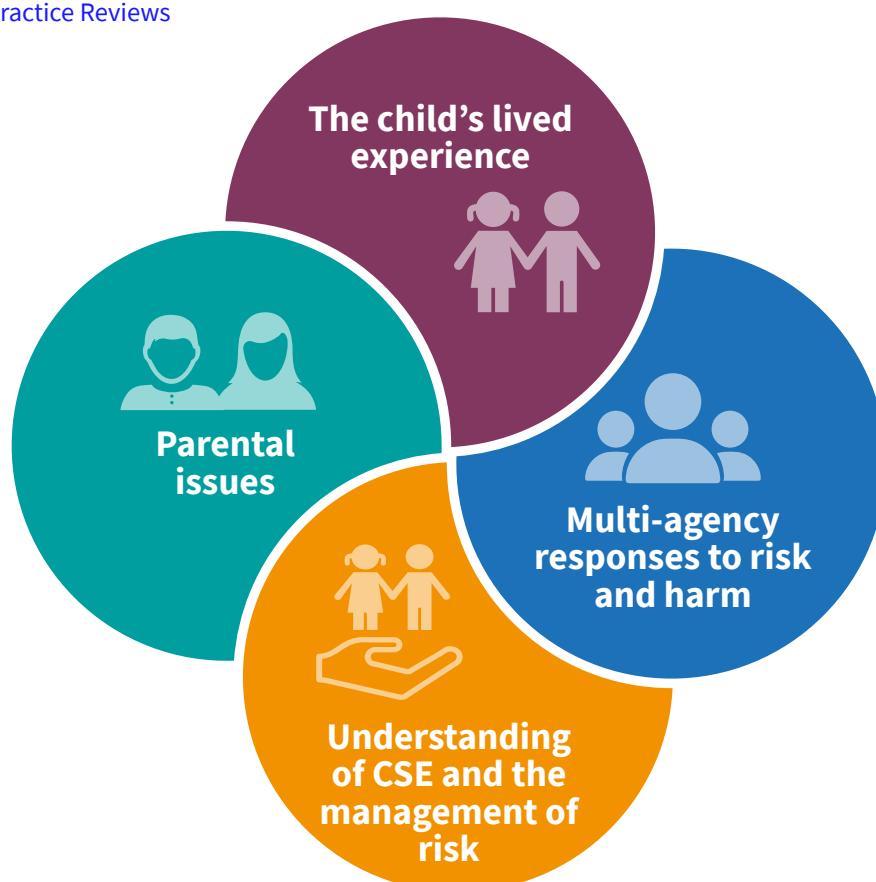
# 1. Key Messages

The importance of appreciating the child's lived experience and the cumulative impact of adversity, harm, and trauma.

Children and young people who make disclosures of abuse and harm must be listened to with the **intent to do something** and consider other behavioural responses to harm.

Children should not be blamed for their own exploitation.

The significance of sharing information through a multi-agency lens. The importance of critical reflection and challenge. Develop systems and practice that are domestic abuse aware and trauma-informed.

The importance of identifying a trusted adult with vulnerable young people and building relationships. Recognising the safety that school can provide for children experiencing intra **and** extra-familial harm.

Increased awareness of the signs of child sexual exploitation and the processes to access specialist guidance/support.

Ensuring disclosures of harm have a statutory multi-agency response and include consideration of health and wellbeing needs.

Developing a whole family /think family response to support understanding of risk where there are complex adult issues.

Recognising the importance of critical thinking through good reflective supervision.

# Seeing, hearing, and listening to children

Ensuring the **child's voice** is at the centre of all safeguarding work is a fundamental principle of good practice and a **child-centred system** (Munro 2011) and involves not only 'listening' but observations of what children are experiencing or thinking through their behaviour rather than what they say.

**Seeing,** evidence of distress communicated through a range of behaviours including self-harm and missing episodes.

**Distress** about not wanting a sexual assault medical *"we won't do anything anyway"*

**Hearing** that she had *"no one to talk to about how she feels because she doesn't trust anyone, (she went on to describe how) she tattoos herself and does drugs and alcohol as a way of releasing how she feels."*

**Listening** and sharing her feelings of being *"abandoned… no one believed me or understood"*

# 2. Definitions

**Child Sexual Exploitation**

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) are both forms of sexual abuse. CSE is sexual abuse that happens outside of the family home and often takes place by a stranger, through grooming and can involve control through violence or threats.

*"Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a type of sexual abuse. When a child or young person is exploited, they are given things, like gifts, drugs, money, status, and affection, in exchange for performing sexual activities. Children and young people are often tricked into believing they are in a loving and consensual relationship. This is called grooming. They may trust their abuser and not understand that they're being abused."*

Child sexual abuse and exploitation | The Children's Society (childrenssociety.org.uk)
Grooming: recognising the signs | NSPCC Learning
Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

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**Extra-familial harm**

Extra-familial harm describes harm that occurs outside of the family environment, this can include peer-on-peer harm, child sexual and criminal exploitation, gangs, and bullying. Intra-familial harm describes harm or abuse that occurs within a family unit. (this could be physical, sexual, emotional or neglect)

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**Contextual safeguarding**

Contextual safeguarding is an approach used to understand and respond to young people's experiences of harm outside the home and beyond their families. It recognises the impact of the public/social context on young people's lives and consequently, their safety. Intervention focuses on the places and spaces where young people spend their time. This approach was developed by Dr Carlene Firmin

Contextual Safeguarding – Safeguarding Network
Contextual-safeguarding-strategy-7-minute-brief.pdf (cescp.org.uk)

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**Links to**

Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership (CESCP)

Welcome to the Cheshire East Safeguarding Children's Partnership Online Procedures (proceduresonline.com)

# 3. What did we learn?

# 4. What does this mean for practice?

## Theme 1 The child's lived experience

- Professionals did not fully appreciate Child L's daily life. It included significant domestic abuse, violence, and parental drug use and its associated chaos.
- The multi-agency team tried hard to engage the family, but there seemed to be too much happening for meaningful engagement.
- Child L's experience of a number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) [1] was known but did not lead to multi-agency reflection.
- The cumulative harm caused by multiple significant events, adverse experiences and trauma meant that the impact and risks were not fully understood and evaluated.

## What got in the way of understanding?

- The consequences of behavioural issues at school.
- Focus on 'problematic behaviours' and being seen as 'uncooperative'.
- Victim-blaming language
- Professional anxiety about the family and wider environment from drug use and heightened violence.
- Self-harm and overdose attempts were not seen as indicators of distress and harm in the context of what was happening.

## Understanding vulnerability, harm, and trauma

Practitioners need to consider predisposing vulnerabilities, adverse experiences (ACEs) and trauma and their cumulative effects. This must be appreciated in the identification, assessment, and work with children to understand the increased risks this presents, and how this can make children more vulnerable to grooming and exploitation.

Models and Tools to support this work are:

The conceptual model 'Pathways to Harm, Pathways to Protection' [2]

Multi-agency chronologies

Relational and trauma-informed approaches support the building of trusted relationships

Using a trauma-informed approach can help practitioners develop a more relational approach to **'what has happened'** rather than a **'what was wrong'** perspective to try and understand and appreciate the child's lived experiences.

It is important to seek out and/or provide regular reflective supervision to help with critical thinking and processing the emotional impact of the work. Repeated self-harm attempts are indicators of distress. Practitioners need to review these and analyse patterns of 'was not brought' for support and intervention.

**Responsibility for engagement rests with the practitioner and children should not be blamed for their lack of cooperation.**

Focusing on 'problematic behaviours' and seeing children as 'uncooperative' and/or accepted behaviour can hinder relationship building.

1 PHW-WHO-ACEs-Handbook-Eng-18_09_23.pdf (phwwhocc.co.uk)
2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/869586/TRIENNIAL_SCR_REPORT_2014_to_2017.pdf

# 3. What did we learn?

## Theme 2.1 Multi-agency responses to risk and harm.

- There were a number of disclosures of physical harm (intra-familial harm) rape and assault in the community (extra-familial harm) Multi-agency actions did not always result in attending to safety.
- Incidents were managed in isolation. There was limited appreciation of what else was going on in the home and community. There was an overreliance on the child making a formal complaint and possible prosecution processes.
- This is highly likely to have left her more vulnerable to the risks of exploitation and contributed to Child L feeling isolated, distressed, and not believed.
- Disclosures of abuse did not always consider Child Protection Medicals.

*" Child L was not hidden; she was visible and subject to child Protection processes for over two years. Practitioners could talk about her, and her voice and behaviour was captured. However, she was simply not heard and understood and despite the multi-agency system around her she was not and did not feel safe in, or outside her home, heightened by her disclosures that she could not trust anyone to share the harm she had experienced."*
**LCSPR Child L October 2023**

# 4. What does this mean for practice?

## Hearing the child. Responding to disclosures of abuse [3]

Responses to children's disclosures should not rely on whether they want to make a formal complaint, there is a lack of evidence or corroborating witnesses or the threshold for criminal proceedings is not met. This could be interpreted as disbelieving the child's disclosure.

It is important where disclosures of harm are made that consideration is given to the need for a child protection medical in line with safeguarding procedures and advocacy for the young person where the disclosure may not be supported by family.

Understanding underlying trauma and its impact on behaviour and mental health is essential when working with vulnerable children and young people. Skilled trauma-informed approaches can strengthen trust, develop relationships, and support interventions to build resilience and recovery.

Children's behaviour is a form of communication. Challenging or help-seeking behaviours may reflect harm, distress, and possible trauma.

## What can make a difference [4]

Attending to the child's lived experience

Engagement with children

Developing trusting relationships

Practising curiosity about children's behaviours and disclosures.

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3  No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse (nspcc.org.uk)

4  Learning for the future: final analysis of serious case reviews, 2017 to 2019 (publishing.service.gov.uk) Chapter 5 the voice of the child

# 3. What did we learn?

## Theme 2.2 Multi-agency responses to risk and harm. Responding to domestic abuse

- Domestic abuse and violence were significant factors in the home.
- Wider instances of violence and harassment in the community (linked to drug debts) increased the risks of harm to the children and the level of fear and anxiety they experienced.
- Incidents in the home were attended to but not always shared and therefore seen through the multi-agency lens.
- Domestic abuse incidents tended to be 'incident led'. The cumulative impact was not considered or appreciated in the context of the disclosures of physical abuse. This meant that Child L did not feel or was safe.
- The DVPO [5] in place was ineffective because it was not enforced, and mother was given the responsibility for ensuring safety.

# 4. What does this mean for practice?

## Sharing information and responding to domestic abuse

This is about making sure that the information held across systems is identified and used to inform the multi-agency assessment of risk, and understanding the significance of individual incidents, patterns, and cumulative impact on children in the household.

Where there are individual child protection processes in place and the threshold is met Strategy Meetings should be held, to ensure a multi-agency response. Information can be triangulated, including the voice of the child, where parallel disclosures of physical harm were made.

A multi-agency response is important locally and nationally. Domestic abuse features in 40% of all cases notified to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) and highlights a lack of a coordinated multi-agency response to domestic abuse. [6]

All practitioners and managers must be fully aware of the varying impacts of domestic abuse on children this includes being domestic abuse aware and trauma-informed and seeing and hearing the child in the context of their lived experience.

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5 Domestic Violence Protection Notices (DVPN) and Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPO) aim to provide victims with immediate protection following an incident of domestic violence. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-violence-protection-orders/domestic-violence-protection-notices-dvpns-and-domestic-violence-protection-orders-dvpos-guidance-sections-24-33-crime-and-security-act-

6 14.149_DFE_Child_safeguarding_Domestic_PB2_v4a.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

# 3. What did we learn?

# 4. What does this mean for practice?

## Theme 3 Understanding Child Sexual Exploitation and the management of risk.

- Child L was not seen as an exploited child within the Contextual Safeguarding forum and was blamed for her behaviour.
- Knowledge and skills need to be strengthened to understand the early signs of CSE, grooming, extra-familial harm, and abuse.
- Child L experienced significant harm both inside and outside of her home environment, these were not considered interactively, therefore the harm and trauma experienced were not understood.
- Victim-blaming language was a barrier to protecting children and contributed to how Child L was seen and consequently how her needs were assessed and responded to.
- Practitioners did not consider 'why' there were difficulties in engagement.
- There were trusted relationships with the school and a commissioned young people's service.

*Professional curiosity "There are a number of critical or "reachable" moments or events in young people's lives, particularly early on in the problem where they may be more receptive to change."*
LCSPR Child L

## Understanding Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Victim-blaming language means that children are not seen as exploited and is a barrier to protecting children.

### Practice principle!
CSE is child abuse. Children and young people must not be blamed for 'putting themselves at risk' and therefore 'choosing' to engage in certain behaviours.

Safeguarding children at risk of CCE is complex and requires a wider appreciation of harm (see Section 2).

Children at risk of extra-familial harm or being harmed must be discussed within multi-agency Contextual Safeguarding forums to ensure and strengthen risk management and safety in line with improved practice in Cheshire East.

Practitioners and managers working with vulnerable adolescents need to be confident about understanding the key signs of child sexual exploitation. This must also include a good understanding of adolescent development.

### Tools and guidance to support practice

Contextual Safeguarding (cescp.org.uk)

Missing from home (cescp.org.uk)

Education is a key protective factor for children who are at risk of both intra and extra-familial harm. Identifying trusted adults and advocacy is significant where there is a risk of children being excluded and /or being moved and displaying behaviours that may reflect their distress.

# 3. What did we learn?

# 4. What does this mean for practice?

## Theme 4. Understanding how adult issues impact parenting.

- Adult issues of domestic abuse, violence, parental substance misuse and criminal behaviours featured extensively in the family over many years.
- They were chronic and complex with features such as drug use that led to exacerbated family and community violence.
- Preoccupying adult behaviours seriously compromised their ability to engage. Both parents had problematic substance misuse.
- The increased risks associated with co-existing adult issues need to be fully considered when assessing the impact and risk on children and parenting.
- A collaborative whole-family approach was needed to appreciate the extent of the difficulties the adults presented fully.
- Drift and delay were identified but not challenged across the child protection multi-agency group.
- Critical thinking and professional challenge regarding attitudes and assumptions was needed and is a key component of multi-agency working.

### Adult issues children's needs.

Adult issues need to be fully considered when assessing families where these problems feature. The increased risks associated with co-existing adult issues can significantly compromise family functioning.

Assessing the impact of these adult issues on family life and the children's needs requires a collaborative whole-family approach to fully appreciate the extent of the difficulties the adults present /experience. Adult services, who have relevant knowledge and skills should be consulted to support understanding and assessment.

There were services in place to support the family but the patterns of engagement and delay in analysing this meant there was no critical exploration of what this meant for the children.

Critical thinking and challenge need to happen across all parts of the safeguarding system to challenge attitudes, and assumptions and encourage reflection. The importance of critical thinking and 'authoritative enquiry' (CSPRP 2021) is a key component of good multi-agency working,

This can occur:

| With parents/carers |
| In supervision, and in |
| Inter-professional challenge |

This is supported by reflective supervision and skilled practice leadership.

# 5. What can you do?

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| **1** | Read and reflect on learning from child safeguarding practice reviews and other evidence-based learning resources and tools to support practice. |
| **2** | Access training, resources and tools to evidence what works and to reflect and improve your own practice, skills, and knowledge. It's ok to ask for support and help in navigating the complexities of child sexual exploitation. |
| **3** | Ensure the child's lived experience including adverse childhood experiences are understood and inform assessment of needs. |
| **4** | Children and young people who make disclosures of abuse and harm must be listened to with the intent to do something and consider other behavioural responses to harm. Understand that children's behaviour is a form of communication and that challenging, or help-seeking behaviours may reflect harm, distress, and possible trauma. |
| **5** | Multi-agency critical reflection and curiosity about children's behaviours and circumstances can help understand harm and abuse. |
| **6** | Use supervision to reflect and challenge assumptions and biases. Use critical thinking skills to inform professional challenges. |
| **7** | Understand the importance of early intervention and prevention and be aware of key indicators of exploitation and extra-familial harm. |
| **8** | Use a relational approach to strengthen and develop relationships and support interventions that build resilience and recovery. |
| **9** | Be aware of your own language and challenge children being blamed for exploitation. Language can directly contribute to how children are seen. |
| **10** | Recognise that child sexual exploitation is child abuse, exploitation is not the child's fault. |