



# Unprotected, overprotected:

meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation

**Executive summary**

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# 1

## Introduction

This UK-wide research study was commissioned by Comic Relief and addresses a significant gap in current understanding of the sexual exploitation of children and young people with learning disabilities. The UK has international obligations to protect children and young people from sexual exploitation, yet evidence suggests that young people with learning disabilities are at increased risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE).

This executive summary outlines key research findings and is one of a number of products of the study. These include:

- a full research report
- an easy-read summary
- a practice guide
- nation-specific briefing papers.

Welsh language versions of the report are also available.

All of the above can be downloaded from [www.barnardos.org.uk/cse-learning-disabilities](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cse-learning-disabilities)

## **1.1 Aims of the research**

This exploratory research study aimed to increase understanding of how to meet the needs of children and young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE. Specifically, the research undertook to:

1. scope and detail current provision, including the scale of interventions for this group of children and young people
2. explore the views of practitioners, managers and local and national policymakers around practice, looking into both enablers of and barriers to good practice
3. understand the needs of this group of children and young people and gather their views on current practice
4. identify gaps in policy, provision, evidence and research
5. generate evidence-based recommendations for future developments to meet these children and young people's needs.

## 1.2 Definitions and terminology

The following definitions and terminology were used in the research:

### Children and young people

The terms ‘young person’ and ‘young people’ have been used for brevity to describe children and young people with learning disabilities who experienced, or were at risk of, CSE while under the age of 18.

### Child sexual exploitation (CSE)

In 2008, the UK National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People<sup>1</sup> developed the following definition of CSE, recognised in English guidance to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation (DCSF, 2009)<sup>2</sup>:

‘The sexual exploitation of children and young people under the age of 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive ‘something’ (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the 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.’

(UK National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People, 2008)<sup>3</sup>

Although recent reports (Berelowitz et al, 2013,<sup>4</sup> 2015;<sup>5</sup> Smeaton, 2013<sup>6</sup>) have highlighted the need for revision of the definition of CSE, the NWG Network’s definition is widely used and understood by policymakers and practitioners, and has therefore been used to frame the research.

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1 The UK National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People is now called the NWG Network. It is a charitable organisation linking practitioners, policymakers and researchers working with CSE across the UK.

2 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation*. DCSF, London.

3 <http://www.nwgnetwork.org/who-we-are/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation>, accessed 26 July 2015.

4 Berelowitz, S; Clifton, J; Firmin, C; Gulyurtlu, S; Edwards, G (2013) *“If only someone had listened”: The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups Final report*. Office of the Children’s Commissioner, London.

5 Berelowitz, S; Ritchie, G; Edwards, G; Gulyurtlu, S; Clifton, J (2015) *“If it’s not better, it’s not the end”: Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups: One year on*. Office of the Children’s Commissioner, London.

6 Smeaton, E (2013) *Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation*. Barnardo’s, London.

## Learning disabilities

A commonly used definition in the UK states that a learning disability meets three criteria:

- 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)<sup>7</sup>

This definition was used to identify the sample of children and young people for the study. However, this research was also guided by the social model of disability, which locates disability in the social, cultural, material and attitudinal barriers that exclude people with impairments from mainstream life. This approach ensured the inclusion of children and young people who had experienced, or been at risk of, CSE and who had a diagnosed learning disability, as well as those with a learning need who had not been formally assessed.

### **1.3 Inclusion of young people with autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)**

While it is recognised that many young people with ASC and/or ADHD will not have learning disabilities, it became apparent during the recruitment process that CSE practitioners were supporting a significant number of young people with ASC and/or ADHD. Although some of these young people also had a specific learning disability, others had unmet learning needs that played a part in placing them at risk of CSE or had led to them being sexually exploited. For this reason, these young people were included in this study.

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Health (2001) *Valuing people: A new strategy for learning disability for the 21st century*. Department of Health, London.







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# 2

## Research methodology and sample

The methodology encompassed both qualitative and quantitative data collection and comprised six concurrent strands:

1. An overview of the current literature and a UK policy analysis
2. Surveys of local authorities/health and social care trusts (n=71, a 34% response rate) and known current practice across the UK (n=23)
3. In-depth telephone interviews with statutory and voluntary sector professionals from frontline and strategic roles across social care, health, education and the police (n=34)
4. Face-to-face interviews with young people (n=27) (young people were aged between 12 and 23 years old; seven were male and 20 female; five were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds; 15 of the young people had been identified as experiencing CSE and the remainder were deemed to be at risk of CSE)<sup>8</sup>
5. Regional consultation events across the UK with professional stakeholders to develop recommendations
6. Consultation with young people with learning disabilities to support the development of the recommendations.

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<sup>8</sup> CSE specialist workers reported that it is quite often the case that they support young people considered at risk of CSE and a disclosure or discovery of CSE occurs, so it is possible that more of the sample of young people had experienced CSE at the time of the interview than identified.

# 3

## Discussion of key research findings

The following section presents key research findings in relation to current knowledge, policy and practice and identifies gaps in meeting the needs of young people.

### **3.1 The vulnerability of young people with learning disabilities to CSE**

Young people with learning disabilities share many of the same vulnerabilities to CSE that are faced by all young people, but the evidence indicates that they face additional barriers to their protection, and to receiving support to address CSE. The reasons for this are complex and appear to be entrenched in the way society perceives and treats young people with learning disabilities. Addressing the sexual exploitation of young people with learning disabilities requires fundamental changes in societal attitudes and approaches to how this group of young people are treated and supported.

Factors that play a part in the failure to recognise that young people with learning disabilities experience, and are at risk of, CSE include:

- the infantilisation<sup>9</sup> of many young people with learning disabilities
- the social isolation of this group of young people
- their lack of empowerment and voice
- the lack of access to information and education on sex and relationships
- false perceptions that young people with learning disabilities do not have the same needs, wishes and desires to have a relationship as all young people, and/or that they cannot be sexually exploited.

It can be inherently challenging for someone with a learning disability to understand the complex factors relating to CSE and how grooming involves, for example, manipulation and exploitation. The research data illustrates that, at present, not enough is done to support many young people with learning disabilities to develop understanding of relationships and risk. The data comprehensively identifies that to further young people with learning disabilities' understanding of CSE and risk requires time, attention and an individualised approach that incorporates their learning and communication needs.

While noting the benefits that technological developments can bring to the lives of young people with learning disabilities, the research also identifies that this group are particularly vulnerable to online grooming and sexual exploitation. This reinforces the need for young people with learning disabilities to receive good advice about internet safety as part of a preventative response.

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9 Infantilisation means to treat someone as if they are still a small child.

This research has highlighted that specific consideration should be given to young people with learning disabilities placed in residential care across the UK and to ensuring robust and effective safeguarding measures are in place to protect them from CSE.

## **3.2 The invisibility of some young people with learning disabilities**

The research revealed the fundamental need to raise awareness of the sexual exploitation of young people with learning disabilities to ensure their needs become visible. Awareness-raising activities should include professionals, advocacy and faith groups, and the wider community, including the business community.

The research highlights that a significant number of young people who become known to CSE services have moderate or mild learning disabilities or learning difficulties – and, in particular, autistic spectrum conditions (ASC) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These young people have often not received support to meet their needs. In some cases, this lack of support appears to be directly linked to the high threshold for disability services, lack of alternative provision to meet their needs and a low level of understanding of these impairments and their potential impact on young people's lives.

The evidence suggests that many of these young people who have moderate learning disabilities or learning difficulties, or are possibly on the autistic spectrum, have never received a formal diagnosis or assessment of need. Young people clearly articulated how the lack of recognition that they have a learning disability can be problematic, leading to frustration and also to others viewing them as exhibiting 'challenging' behaviour. For some, problems at school led them to cease engaging in education or being excluded, which further increases their vulnerability to CSE. There appears to be a clear pattern across the UK of CSE professionals working with young people for whom there is no formal or informal identification of a learning disability or specific learning need. Although this warrants further investigation, it appears that this issue is exacerbated by a lack of: knowledge around learning disabilities; information sharing; multi-agency working; and available services to meet these young people's needs.

Specialist CSE professionals' articulation of a desire for a formal diagnosis reflects their search for information that can provide them with an improved understanding of how they can work with a young person most effectively. Many also identified that a formal diagnosis is particularly crucial to meeting young people's needs, as it is often the only route to accessing additional specialist support.

### **3.3 Identification of numbers of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE**

There are challenges to identifying numbers of young people across the UK, and these are exacerbated by:

- the invisibility of young people with learning disabilities
- the widespread lack of diagnosis and assessment of needs
- the lack of understanding of both CSE and learning disabilities among some professionals
- the absence of a shared terminology relating to learning disabilities and/or learning difficulties
- the general lack of data collection relating to the sexual exploitation of young people with learning disabilities.

Only 31 per cent of local authorities/health and social care trusts (HSCTs) that reported that they collate figures on CSE stated that the numbers of young people with learning disabilities could be identified. It is vital to more fully understand the prevalence and nature of the sexual exploitation of this group of young people, to enable support and services to improve prevention and responses to meet young people's needs.

The research clearly identifies the need for improvements in multi-agency information-sharing concerning learning disabilities, and for CSE project referral forms to ask for appropriately detailed information about a diagnosed, or suspected, learning disability. Currently, only a quarter of local authorities/HSCTs that reported that they have information-sharing protocols stated that this includes the need to share information around potential or known learning disabilities in a child.

While many specialist CSE professionals reported a recent increase in referrals relating to young people with learning disabilities, many also described how young people with learning disabilities are often not referred for support to address CSE.

### **3.4 Issues relating to diversity**

The research identifies a clear need for further consideration and exploration of diversity issues among young people. This will better meet their needs and ensure that they do not remain particularly vulnerable to CSE as a result of being hidden. Data illustrated that consideration should be given to:

- addressing the lack of referrals of young people with learning disabilities from black and minority ethnic communities to specialist CSE services



- addressing the challenges relating to the recognition that boys and young men with learning disabilities are at risk of being – and are being – sexually exploited
- meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities in relation to sexual identity, sexuality and sexual orientation
- ensuring that girls and young women with ASC are not overlooked.

### **3.5 Improving national governments’ responses to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE**

The research reveals that international obligations to protect children and young people from sexual exploitation and to protect the rights of disabled children and adults are not consistently implemented across the UK. Where young people with learning disabilities are mentioned in national policy documents and guidance addressing CSE, the particularly limited direction for agencies and professionals poses challenges to ensuring effective preventative and responsive measures.

There are a number of forthcoming opportunities across the UK to ensure that young people with learning disabilities are included in national guidance, policy and actions plans addressing CSE. For example, in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)’s implementation plan in response to the recommendations of the CSE inquiry<sup>10</sup> presents an opportunity to consider young people with learning disabilities, as do developments in Scotland in response to its action plan to tackle CSE.<sup>11</sup> In England, the commitment of the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People *National Working Group Progress Report and Action Plan* (HM Government, 2015)<sup>12</sup> to revision of the supplementary guidance also offers a timely opportunity to improve guidance relating to young people with learning disabilities.

### **3.6 Resource issues**

The general lack of resources is highlighted, as this impacts on wider preventative work with communities, parents and carers, and young people, and also on the direct support for young people. The evidence also highlights the need for national investment to develop CSE resources and materials specifically tailored to support direct practice with young people with learning disabilities.

10 Marshall, K (2014) *Child sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland: Report of the independent inquiry*. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, Northern Ireland.

11 Scottish Government (2014) *Scotland’s national action plan to tackle child sexual exploitation*.

12 HM Government (2015) *Sexual violence against children and vulnerable people national working group progress report and action plan 2015*. HMG, London.

### **3.7 Local implementation of national CSE guidance and local responses to young people with learning disabilities**

The evidence suggests that implementation of CSE guidance at a local level remains generally inconsistent. Across the UK, there appear to be limited responses to young people. This is unsurprising given the limited focus on this group in national policy and guidance documents, and the lack of identification and low levels of awareness of their sexual exploitation.

Many local areas have not started to address the sexual exploitation of young people with learning disabilities at either a strategic or an operational level. While 41 per cent of local authorities/HSCTs that responded to the survey stated that they have a specialist CSE service, only half of these felt that this service was currently able to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities. Twenty-five per cent of local authorities/HSCTs said they do not have any other support available in place of a specialist CSE service. However, the research highlights that some local areas are taking strategic and operational steps to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities. For example, some local authorities/HSCTs reported automatic identification of young people with learning disabilities at risk of CSE as a medium or high risk.

The research confirms previous findings (Berelowitz et al, 2013;<sup>13</sup> Jago et al, 2011;<sup>14</sup> Smeaton, 2013<sup>15</sup>) of the need for local areas to undertake mapping activity, including a focus on learning disability, to help with assessing and responding to local needs in relation to this group of young people.

### **3.8 Improved multi-agency working**

Some local authorities/HSCTs have a CSE lead with responsibility for joint work with disability services. Nonetheless, many local areas reported: lack of representation from disability services at multi-agency strategic or operational groups; a lack of attendance from disability services on local CSE training; and a lack of referrals relating to CSE from disability services. This suggests that more multi-agency work across CSE and disability services is required. The necessity for improvements in multi-agency working concerning CSE generally has previously been recommended by a number of reports addressing CSE

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13 Berelowitz, S; Clifton, J; Firmin, C; Gulyurtlu, S; Edwards, G (2013) *“If only someone had listened”*: The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/if-only-someone-had-listened-inquiry-child-sexual-exploitation-gangs-and-groups>, accessed 17 August 2015.

14 Jago, S; Arocha, L; Brodie, I; Melrose, M; Pearce, J; Warrington, C (2011) *What’s going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation*. University of Bedfordshire, Luton.

15 Smeaton, E (2013) *Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation*. Barnardo’s, London.

(Jay, 2014;<sup>16</sup> Smeaton, 2013;<sup>17</sup> Berelowitz et al, 2015<sup>18</sup>). This research highlights the crucial importance of effective multi-agency working to meet the needs of young people and ensuring that they do not fall into gaps between services.

### **3.9 The response of social care and disability services**

Both young people and professionals described mixed responses from social care services to young people. Of particular significance is the reported low level of knowledge and awareness of CSE in children's disability services which, in turn, appears to explain the lack of referrals relating to CSE concerns from children's disability teams. This highlights the need for local authorities to ensure that disability teams access training and other CSE awareness initiatives, and for specialist CSE services to build links with disability services.

### **3.10 The role of educational provision**

The research findings highlight the need for all educational provision to do more to engage with the CSE agenda – as a preventative measure, but also in helping to identify young people. Professionals outlined how many young people with learning disabilities do not have a basic understanding of sex. The research emphasises the importance of providing more general support to young people with learning disabilities and offering accessible and appropriate sex and relationships education programmes focusing on healthy relationships and raising awareness of CSE. Attention needs to be paid to ensuring that this forms part of every young person's education.

### **3.11 The police and the wider criminal justice system**

Both professionals' and young people's experiences reveal inconsistencies in police responses to young people and a general need to improve practice. The research reveals examples of positive responses from the police, which centred on them having an understanding of learning disabilities, and working in partnership with those who do, in order to create a supportive process and environment for young people who have experienced CSE. Research findings suggest that police forces across the UK should:

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16 Jay, A (2014) *Independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013*. [http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent\\_inquiry\\_cse\\_in\\_rotherham](http://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham), accessed 19 August 2015.

17 Smeaton, E (2013) *Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation*. Barnardo's, London.

18 Berelowitz, S; Ritchie, G; Edwards, G; Gulyurtlu, S; Clifton, J (2015) *"If it's not better, it's not the end": Inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups: One year on*. <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/%E2%80%9Cif-it%E2%80%99s-not-better-it%E2%80%99s-not-end%E2%80%9D-inquiry-child-sexual-exploitation-gangs-and-groups-0>, accessed 17 August 2015.

- undertake awareness-raising training to improve their understanding of the needs of young people with learning disabilities
- train specialist police interviewers to work with young people with learning disabilities
- ensure the police work in partnership with local agencies or professionals with expertise in working with young people with learning disabilities.

Professionals who participated in the research reported how young people with learning disabilities have acted as credible witnesses in the prosecution of perpetrators of CSE. Young people can be supported to act as witnesses when agencies work in partnership and there is a willingness to adapt processes and procedures to meet an individual's needs. The small number of young people who participated in the research and had experienced the criminal justice system as a victim of, and witness to, CSE reported difficult and traumatic experiences of this process. There is a clear need to build on good practice to ensure that more young people with learning disabilities can be supported to go through the court process to prosecute perpetrators of CSE. Although more evidence is needed, research findings regarding the role of intermediaries to support vulnerable witnesses suggest this model can have a number of benefits, including increasing the chances of cases reaching court and facilitating communication within the court process (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2009).<sup>19</sup>

The research also highlights the importance of ensuring improvements in the implementation of the England and Wales Crown Prosecution Service's 2013 *Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse*,<sup>20</sup> in line with the University of Bedfordshire's recommendation (2015)<sup>21</sup> of the need to bridge the gap between policy and practice and ensure that stated entitlements and recommendations are translated into practice with young victims and witnesses.

### 3.12 Improving professionals' knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities and CSE

The research findings outline that there remain significant gaps in professionals' knowledge of both CSE and learning disabilities and of how to meet the needs of young people. The research identifies the need for multi-agency training at a local level for all professionals whose work includes responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of young people and their families. There is also a need for training focusing on learning disabilities, ASC and ADHD for CSE professionals, and for professionals whose work focuses on

19 Plotnikoff, J; Woolfson, R (2009) *Measuring up? Evaluating implementation of government commitments to young witnesses in criminal proceedings*. NSPCC, London.

20 Director of Public Prosecutions (2013) *Guidelines on prosecuting cases of child sexual abuse*. [http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a\\_to\\_c/child\\_sexual\\_abuse/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/a_to_c/child_sexual_abuse/), accessed 3 August 2015.

21 Beckett, H; Warrington, C (2015) *Making justice work: Experiences of criminal justice for children and young people affected by sexual exploitation as victims and witnesses*. <http://www.beds.ac.uk/ic/current-projects/making-justice-work>, accessed 3 August 2015.

young people with learning disabilities to receive training to improve their awareness of CSE. The current lack of training hinders the identification of, and availability of support for, young people.

### **3.13 Supporting young people with learning disabilities to disclose CSE**

The literature review identifies specific barriers faced by disabled young people relating to disclosure and professionals' identification of their abuse. This research provides further evidence of this, indicating that these young people may not report CSE because they do not know they are being sexually exploited, and they may fear getting into trouble. The evidence also indicates that some adults, including professionals, are not proactively identifying potential signs of CSE, thus placing a burden on young people with learning disabilities to recognise and disclose that they have been sexually exploited.

Young people's descriptions of their disclosure of CSE revealed how professionals sometimes did not ask about their experiences of risk or relationships. Young people's experiences revealed how disclosures of CSE are often made after a professional has built a relationship over a long period of time, based on trust and listening to the young person, thus reinforcing the importance of long-term support for young people affected by CSE. This emphasises the need for professionals to ensure that they not only undertake a thorough assessment of young people's needs and circumstances, but also present themselves to a young person in such a way that the young person feels comfortable talking to them.

### **3.14 Direct support for young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE**

Young people interviewed for the study who had been supported by CSE services reported a number of positive outcomes facilitated by individual, accessible support – usually delivered over a long period of time – and a positive, trusting relationship with workers within a CSE service.<sup>22</sup> While positive practice is taking place, some specialist CSE professionals reported that the unavailability of accessible resources to support their work, sometimes combined with insufficient applied training or inexperience in work relating to learning disabilities, means that they do not always feel confident that they are able to meet some young people's needs. Similar difficulties and inconsistencies in direct work have been highlighted in other reports on disabled children's

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<sup>22</sup> This evidence is reported in detail in the accompanying practice guide.

safeguarding, indicating that much more needs to be done to better support these young people (Taylor et al, 2014).<sup>23</sup>

In the absence of identifiable resources specifically for young people with learning disabilities many specialist CSE professionals described how they adapt existing CSE resources. There is evidence that this can work well to support with increasing some young people's understanding of risk, CSE and steps that assist with keeping safe. However, there is a need for more evaluation of practice and resources with this group of young people to enable further understanding of what works well to meet their needs.

### **3.15 Responses to young people aged 18 and older**

The research reveals the importance of addressing the needs of young people with learning disabilities once they become 18-years-old. Concerns were expressed about the protection of these vulnerable young people once they have moved from children's to adults' services and are no longer in receipt of specialist CSE services. Preventative work around relationships, consent and sexual exploitation is seen to be a crucial part of preparing young people with learning disabilities for adult life and an essential part of any transition planning, yet appears to be woefully neglected.

### **3.16 Young people with learning disabilities who experience CSE and exhibit inappropriate sexual behaviour or become involved in the sexual exploitation of others**

Concerns were expressed in the course of the research about how the experience of CSE can play a part in some young people with learning disabilities exhibiting inappropriate sexual behaviours or becoming involved in the sexual exploitation of others. There is a clear need for cross-agency awareness-raising, including professionals based in criminal justice agencies, to ensure appropriate responses are put in place that include treating these young people as victims and ensuring they receive support to address abuse and trauma.

### **3.17 Listening to young people with learning disabilities**

Underpinning the research findings is the need to listen to young people with learning disabilities. This research shows that their lack of empowerment

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, J; Stalker, K; Fry, D; Stewart, ABR (2014) *Disabled children and child protection in Scotland: An investigation into the relationship between professional practice, child protection and disability*. Scottish Government Social Research, Edinburgh.

contributes directly to their increased vulnerability to CSE. In addition, their lack of 'voice', or not being listened to, led to some young people's disclosures not being taken seriously. In some cases, their resulting behaviour was interpreted as 'challenging', which meant that they continued to be ignored and their needs were not met. The evidence highlights how protecting young people with learning disabilities must start with listening to them and providing early support to prevent CSE.





# 4

**Recommendations  
to improve meeting  
the needs of young  
people with learning  
disabilities who  
experience, or are at  
risk of, CSE**

Evidence-based recommendations from the research are detailed in this final section. When reading the recommendations, it is important to bear in mind that:

- despite the primary focus of the research having been on young people with learning disabilities, the evidence gathered indicates that these recommendations are equally applicable to young people with learning difficulties and autistic spectrum conditions (ASC), and to those young people whose learning disability has not been assessed or diagnosed and who may not meet the high eligibility threshold for disability services
- although each recommendation plays a part in improving the situation, to produce effective and sustainable change, the recommendations should be implemented in combination; coordinated action across a number of areas is required to meet the needs of young people
- the recommendations are expressed using generic terms that can be applied across all nations of the UK. The detail on how the recommendations apply in each nation can be found in the full research report and nation-specific briefing papers.<sup>24</sup>

The recommendations are as follows:

**1. Governments must ensure development, revision and implementation of legislation, policy and guidance to meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE.**

- a. Governments must ensure the implementation of existing legislation, policy and guidance relating to young people with learning disabilities and CSE. This includes fully enacting the UK's international obligations to protect children from sexual exploitation, as stated in Article 34 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the rights to protection and inclusion of young people with learning disabilities enshrined within the UNCRC and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
- b. Development and revision of statutory and practice guidance and action plans addressing CSE and child protection should incorporate information relating to young people with learning disabilities and include: vulnerability to CSE; prevention of CSE; identification of young people who have experienced CSE; and meeting the needs of these individuals.
- c. Legislation, policy and guidance in the four UK nations should ensure the implementation of a welfare- and child-centred approach for young people identified as perpetrators of CSE. This should

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24 These can be downloaded from [www.barnardos.org.uk/cse-learning-disabilities](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/cse-learning-disabilities)

include young people with learning disabilities up to the age of 18, and older where appropriate.

- d. Any future development and revision of legislation, central and local government action plans, policy and statutory guidance relating to young people with learning disabilities or CSE should take into account all of the evidence-based recommendations produced by this research study.

## **2. Multi-agency arrangements must lead to an effective response to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE.**

- a. All Local Safeguarding Children Boards, child protection committees, regional safeguarding children boards and safeguarding panels should ensure that key agencies identify a designated strategic and operational CSE lead for disabled children and young people.
- b. Multi-agency CSE mapping activity should take place and incorporate a focus on the risks to young people with learning disabilities, in order to support assessment and response.
- c. Multi-agency responses to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE should focus on meeting their individual needs. This should include needs relating to both diagnosed learning disabilities and the assessment of suspected learning disabilities. Multi-agency responses should include adults' services for young people who remain at risk of sexual exploitation at the age of 18.

## **3. Governments and local agencies, including education providers, should take an active role in raising awareness of CSE among young people with learning disabilities and their parents and carers, and equip and empower them with the skills and knowledge to keep safe and seek help.**

- a. All educational establishments should provide high-quality, age-appropriate sex and relationships education, including same-sex relationships, with information adapted and made accessible. This should form part of a whole-school approach to child protection that includes information about internet safety, awareness of exploitation and when to give, obtain or refuse consent.
- b. Information and guidance on sex, relationships, keeping safe and risk-taking must form part of every child's plan (education, health and/or care plan) and associated support, in order to help young people with learning disabilities to build their understanding, knowledge and confidence, and reduce social isolation. This should form part of a life course approach to supporting young people with learning disabilities as they grow into adulthood.

- c. Services for young people with learning disabilities should provide accessible information and support on sex, relationships (including same-sex relationships) and keeping safe, both online and offline.
- d. Parents and carers should be supported to improve their awareness of CSE and enabled to protect and support their children, both online and offline.

**4. Regulatory bodies for education, social care, health and criminal justice should ensure that all inspections, including those relating to child protection or CSE, incorporate a focus on responses to young people with learning disabilities.**

- a. All inspection work should appropriately and meaningfully include young people with learning disabilities to ensure their views inform practice and policy development, implementation and evaluation.

**5. Professionals, practitioners and volunteers should be better equipped to respond to young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE.**

- a. Organisations responsible for the pre-qualification training curricula and induction of professionals whose work involves young people and families should make sure that learning disability and CSE are included as core topics for study and preparation for practice.
- b. Bodies that commission, and agencies that deliver, multi-agency training at a local level to professionals whose work includes responsibility for the safety and welfare of children should ensure that this incorporates information on both CSE and learning disabilities.
- c. Employers and organisations whose workers or volunteers have regular contact with young people with learning disabilities and their families (e.g. special schools and colleges, residential schools and colleges, providers of residential or personal care, and volunteering agencies) should provide CSE awareness training for their staff.
- d. Applied learning disabilities training should be made available to specialist CSE professionals who work with young people, to enhance their knowledge and skills to better meet the needs of young people with learning disabilities.
- e. Resources to support interventions with young people with learning disabilities to address CSE, which can be tailored or adapted to meet individual needs, should be produced by specialists with the appropriate knowledge and experience.

**6. CSE campaigns and awareness-raising activities at national and local levels should include a focus on young people with learning disabilities and be aimed at all stakeholder groups, in order to raise awareness of the sexual exploitation of these young people and encourage action to improve protection.**

- a. The professional audience should include those working in mainstream children's services, as well as those working within specialist provision for disabled children and disability advocacy groups.
- b. Public audiences should include parents and carers of young people with learning disabilities and the wider community, including the business community, faith groups and those from black and minority ethnic communities.
- c. Campaigning activity should be developed and delivered in partnership with children, young people and young adults with learning disabilities and all materials made available in a range of accessible formats.





**Unprotected,  
overprotected:** Meeting  
the needs of young people  
with learning disabilities  
who experience, or  
are at risk of, sexual  
exploitation

**Executive summary**

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