



CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION: EMERGING AND PROMISING PRACTICE APPROACHES

There is a lack of research that identifies what effective practice with criminally exploited children looks like. So, this document draws on learning from a range of other areas as a starting point. Much of the research in this field to date has focussed on white adolescent males and excludes the specific needs of children who fall outside of this group. Taking into account these limitations, this paper seeks to summarise what may be helpful to practitioners when working directly with children and their caregivers. There will be other examples that have not been captured in this paper.

For exploiters to avoid detection, a range of methods are used to identify, groom, recruit and hold a child in county lines activity. High levels of coercion and control are often seen within this model of exploitation. It is therefore imperative that each child is seen as unique, and so is their experience. This will help to avoid a 'one size fits all' mindset. This includes considering the child's emotional and cognitive age, whether the child is autistic or has any other forms of disability / impairment. Practitioners should always be responsive to the individual needs of a child, and this includes how they process and retain information, their preferred learning style, and any sensory needs they may have, prior to intervention.

Exploited children often hold dual identities, both as victims of exploitation and perpetrators of high harm crime, such as violence. It can be difficult to hold in mind both identities, meaning that often, one view of the child will become the strongly held view of professionals.

Consent within county lines activity is often highly complex. Children will sometimes swing from believing they are willing participants to wanting their exploitation to stop. Careful consideration should be given to the issue of consent and how this is given, (for further information on this topic, click [here](#)). In addition, there can also be a significant risk to those connected to the child, for example a sibling, caregiver, or partner. In addition, caregivers and those close to the child can also be at risk of secondary (vicarious) trauma, because of their child's experiences. Despite the challenges of working in this area, there is clearly good practice taking place at a local level.

Many of the papers considered in this review, refer to a range of overarching approaches, theories, and frameworks. A key principle for all youth justice practitioners is the 'child first' principle. In the [Youth Justice Board's Standards for children in youth justice system 2019](#), sets out the principles for how we should be working with children:

1. Prioritise the best interests of children, recognising their needs, capacities, rights, and potential.
2. Build on children's individual strengths and capabilities as a means of developing a pro-social identity for sustainable desistance from crime. This leads to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.
3. Encourage children's active participation, engagement, and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.
4. Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using prevention, diversion, and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

The most important thing a practitioner can do is to establish trust with the child. Without this, interventions may not be effective and risk setting a child up to not succeed.

It is hoped that this paper will be helpful to practitioners, so that key practice points can help inform the approach that is taken when trust is established. We would advise that this briefing paper is read in conjunction with the other work completed by the Pathfinder. This can be found on the Youth Justice Board's Effective Practice Hub.

[BUILDING TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH PUBLIC SERVICES \(Lewing et al 2018\)](#)

Developing trusted relationship with children who are criminally exploited can go some way to counteract the secrecy and risks that surround criminal exploitation. Trusting relationships can help build resilience in exploited children. It should be noted that fear of reprisal, fear of rejection from peers and a lack of faith that agencies and professionals can keep children safe, may result in many children having superficial relationships with professionals.

Trusted relationships should be reciprocal. Roles and boundaries should be understood, and the child must be clear about what happens to the information they share. Care should be taken to ensure that professional relationships do not become personal relationships, particularly when relationships are intensive and over a long period of time. The relationship needs to have a clear remit and maintain focus.

Principles of building a trusted relationship:

- Time is required to build rapport and trust. More time at the start may be needed to demonstrate a commitment to the child.
- If a child has been let down by adults, having a consistent relationship is often important to them. Practitioners should hold in mind that if there have been lots of professionals working with a child, the child may be reluctant to repeat their story. To gain a deeper understanding of what is going on, time is needed.
- Validating someone's experiences demonstrates that you are interested and care.
- Consistently doing what you say you will demonstrate reliability and honesty.
- High quality relationships are built by being empathic, non-judgemental, having good communication skills and actively listening to the child.
- Working at the child's pace and in environments where they feel safe (principles of good youth work).

Skills needed to develop a trusting relationship:

- A basic grasp of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to support young people think about how they can change things
- Skills in coaching and mentoring
- Basic counselling skills
- Motivational interviewing skills
- Solution focussed approaches
- Strengths based approaches
- Unconditional acceptance to help enable, empower, motivate, and encourage children to tackle issues and build their confidence by recognising and helping them achieve solutions
- Use of the [Signs of Safety framework](#) (Turnell and Murphy 2014) and restorative practice can help develop relationships and encourage and engage the child

[The Relationship-based Practice Framework for Youth Justice](#) (Stephenson and Dix, 2017) is a strengths-based approach which draws upon the evidence available, including the principles and skills outlined above, into a useful framework to help practitioners to support a child move towards desistance.

Signs of Safety approach in Suffolk

The Signs of Safety Child Protection Approach and Framework (Turnell and Murphy 2014) has been developed in Suffolk to suit a local context and the Suffolk Practice Approach includes 6 key interconnected elements which are used in combination:

- Signs of Safety values and behaviours
- An overarching comprehensive assessment framework for conversation, thinking and analysis
- Ways to work with people and family's naturally connected networks
- Solution building principles and skills
- Acknowledging, validating, and responding to people's everyday lived experiences
- Theory and research

The Practice Approach in Suffolk places strong relationships at its centre as the most effective catalyst for change. It emphasises the development of safety and wellbeing for the child and family as well as their naturally connected networks, while making the most effective use of solution focused work and resources. Both Signs of Safety (Turnell and Murphy 2014) and the Suffolk Practice Approach encourages a person-centred approach by fully involving the child or young person and their networks (social and professional) in developing intervention plans to improve and promote wellbeing. This, in turn, supports desistance.

There is little empirical evidence for the use of Signs of Safety (Turnell and Murphy 2014) with children who are criminally exploited, but this approach fits well with this group of children. We know that sometimes, caregivers and siblings are often the first people to suspect that something is not right, and they can also see and hear things linked to the exploitation. Engaging and working with caregivers collaboratively, as partners in the process of finding solutions, is therefore critical. The Signs of Safety framework supports balancing safety and risk, requires clear communication that includes honesty with children and families. Families are a key component in the design and delivery of the plan, including identifying the wider networks, by recognising that they are the experts in their lives (Turnell 2013). For further information, click [here](#).

Trauma-informed Practice

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that significant numbers of children known to youth justice services have experienced complex developmental and relational trauma. Relational trauma requires relational repair, and therefore requires interventions that have their foundations in developing safe and trusting relationships before more traditional interventions can be introduced. So long as exploited children remain at risk of harm, they will remain in their 'survival' brains; and show very little capacity for thinking and reasoning.

In 2017 the Youth Justice Board (YJB) published a literature review of trauma informed [interventions and assessments](#) and Beyond Youth Custody published a [review of research and practice literature](#) in 2016 which presented key findings concerning trauma in the backgrounds of children who come into contact with the youth justice system. This report also made recommendations for trauma-informed resettlement practice. One model of working with children who have experienced trauma is the Enhanced Case Management (ECM) approach (Youth Justice Board 2020), which is a psychology- led consultation and case formulation method, which builds on the existing asset-plus assessment used within youth justice to consider the child's history and development. Intervention is then informed by the [Trauma Recovery Model](#) (Skuse and Matthew 2015) which draws on the following:

- Maslow's theory of Hierarchy of Needs
- Cognitive theory of child/adolescent development
- Attachment theory
- Current understanding of neurodevelopment
- Criminology: Desistance theory, Good Lives, and change theories

Exploited children can be exposed to repeated trauma through violence and abuse (either victim of or witness to) and can also experience trauma as a result of their own violent behaviour. Caregivers are also likely to experience trauma linked to their child's exploitation.

Trauma can overwhelm someone's ability to cope in normal situations and affect their sense of safety, self-regulation, and approach to developing relationships. The experience of trauma can lead to serious mental health difficulties in later life. Practitioners should hold in mind that if a disclosure is made, appropriate support should be put in place swiftly for both the child and caregiver. However, getting support 'right' for the child can be difficult, and there is equally a need to guard against the involvement of multiple services which may further overwhelm, and prove counter-productive.

Trauma informed practice is a strengths-based framework which acknowledges the significant impact of physical, emotional, or psychological trauma and provides a space in which children can start to achieve a felt sense of safety and rebuild a sense of control. To help exploited children recover, professional support should be provided for as long as it takes for a child to build a trusted relationship. This will take time for children who have experienced high levels of coercive and controlling behaviours which is common within county lines exploitation. Adopting a trauma informed approach requires practitioners to exercise considerable thought about their practices; and recognise how experiences of trauma (i.e.,

loss of control, feeling voiceless and choiceless) can be replicated within professional systems. Within any interaction, practitioners should strive to ensure their actions are 'trauma reducing' rather than 'trauma inducing' to avoid potential re-traumatisation.

Restorative Practice

Restorative practice allows those who have been involved in some form of conflict, an opportunity to come together to have their voice heard and try and find a way forward. Restorative practice could be of benefit to exploited children and their caregivers to help repair the harm caused by the exploitation. Exploiters seek to disrupt and harm a child's relationship with their caregivers. Restorative practice could support a child being re-integrated back into the family home. A careful balance will need to be struck to ensure children who have been exploited, are not blamed (or made to feel responsible) for their exploitation. Restorative practice compliments [Signs of Safety](#) (Turnell and Edwards 1999), trauma informed practice and supports desistance by taking a whole family / network approach. Some form of indirect process may be helpful when children and or caregivers are not yet ready to discuss matters face to face.

The [Restorative Justice Council](#) set out six key principles in their [Restorative Practice Guidance \(2020\)](#):

- **Restoration** – the primary aim of restorative practice is to address the needs of participants and not cause further harm The focus of any process must be on promoting restorative practice that is helpful, explores relationships and builds resilience.
- **Voluntarism** – participation in restorative practice is voluntary and based on open, informed and ongoing choice and consent. Everyone has the right to withdraw at any point.
- **Impartiality** – restorative practitioners must remain impartial and ensure their restorative practice is respectful, non-discriminatory and unbiased towards all participants. Practitioners must be able to recognise potential conflicts of interest which could affect their impartiality. are fair and unbiased towards either participant.
- **Safety** – processes and practice aim to ensure the safety of all participants and create a safe space for the expression of feelings and views which must result in no further harm being caused.
- **Accessibility** – restorative practice must be respectful and inclusive of any diversity needs such as mental health conditions, disability, cultural, religion, race, gender or sexual identity.
- **Empowerment** – restorative practice must support individuals to feel more confident in making their own informed choices to find solutions and ways forward which best meet their needs

If a restorative approach were to be considered, careful consideration should be given to:

- The trauma the exploited child and the caregivers have experienced.
 - Where are they in that journey now? Could this process cause more harm? What is the worst thing that could happen and how would participant's cope?

- At what stage of the exploitation a restorative process should be considered.
 - Could reachable / teachable moments act as a trigger to a restorative process? Could remands / custodial periods, support a restorative process to improve resettlement outcomes? Does the child recognise that they have been exploited?
- The dual role of the child as both victim and perpetrator.
 - Do they need an advocate or supporter?
- The dual role of the caregiver as both victim and caregiver to the child.
 - Do they need an advocate or a supporter?
- Whether siblings should be included.
 - Do they need an advocate or supporter?
- The participants' understanding of exploitation, including coercion and control.
 - Do they recognise what has happened? What would the child be comfortable sharing, and how would the caregivers receive this?
- The broader context of the dynamics and the history within the relationship.
 - Could other matters arise?
- What would reparation and reintegration look like?
 - Perhaps families spending time together?
 - An acknowledgement of the harm caused as a result of the exploitation.
- What would a flexible approach that travels at the pace of all participants look like?
 - Consideration will need to be given to engagement prior to exploring any restorative practice and the continued monitoring of wellbeing.

Motivational Interviewing (MI)

MI can help promote desistance, through the skills and knowledge to actively seek out and nurture motivation. An interviewing style which is based upon motivational techniques and a belief system which sees motivation not as a fixed unchangeable feature of the child, but as an aspect of behaviour which can be modified through the use of the right approach, and of asking the right questions, is essential. This includes expressing empathy. Empathy in this context is not about collusion but using reflective listening and demonstrating understanding without apportioning judgement or blame. This is critical for exploited children, who are often filled with shame. MI also supports children to move from where they are currently to where they wish to be in the future and involves '[rolling with resistance](#)' (Miller and Rollnick 2013). By actively involving children, and their caregivers, to find answers and solutions to the difficulties they may be experiencing can help to build confidence and support self-efficacy. It is important to demonstrate hope and the belief that things can change. Children learning to believe in themselves again, aspiring and engaging in positive activities are key. MI is integrated within desistance, a trauma informed approach and restorative practice.

MI emphasises the person's control and choice, reflecting on what has been said and seeking to highlight potential ambiguity regarding the possibility of change (Miller and Rollnick 2013). This approach is suited to exploited children who are involved in county lines activity, as many will have had their choices removed, as part of the exploitation. Practitioners need to hold in mind that they should not mirror the behaviours the child has already been subjected to by the exploiter. For example, telling the child to do things, trying to persuade them to do / not do things, having an agenda (for example, chasing a disclosure). The child will recognise these behaviours and potentially disengage.

Contextual Safeguarding

The Contextual Safeguarding Network provides research, practice guides and an implementation toolkit to enable effective practice with children who are exploited by county line activities. Contextual safeguarding builds on the approaches mentioned above by supporting desistance, working with networks, and involving children.

The following paragraph is taken from the Contextual Safeguarding Network:

'Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families'. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts, and young people's experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships. Therefore, children's social care practitioners, child protection systems and wider safeguarding partnerships need to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse beyond their front doors' (Contextual Safeguarding Network, 2020 on-line) ([Contextual Safeguarding.org.uk](https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk)).

Although more research and evaluations are needed, there are reports which identify promising practice within a county lines context.

The [IT WAS HARD TO ESCAPE](#) (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel 2020) report identified that agencies and professionals are not always clear about what they can do to help a child who is at risk of criminal exploitation. The report states that there are a number of different approaches and interventions being developed across the country, but that there is a lack of evidence of what works, and no central place where approaches can be evaluated and disseminated. Finding effective responses to the cases that were reviewed were difficult. The report provides suggestions for working directly with children and their caregivers:

- Currently there is not any high-quality research evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of trusted relationships with a CCE cohort, but there is a logical link:
 - Trusted relationships are important and essential for communication and risk management.
 - Having a small number working with the child is more effective than putting in lots of professionals.
 - Spending quality time is important, as is taking a flexible approach and working with the child in their community.
 - Focusing on a strengths-based approach helps to build trusting relationships.
 - Professionals with more experience of working with adolescents are often more able to build helpful relationships.
 - Relationship based practice helps to keep children safe. Professionals must earn the trust of children if they want to succeed in protecting them.

Focusing upon establishing connection with one trusted adult reduces the emotional burden and time pressures on the exploited child. We also know that for any therapeutic or supportive strategy to work, first there needs to be some kind of connection and attunement to the child's needs.

- There are points when a child is more likely to engage or respond to help:
 - Fear and pain tend to be the motivations behind these moments so holding in mind that school exclusions, arrest and injury are all critical times for evoking change. It should also be noted that practitioners need to be persistent at these points and continue to offer support, guidance, and help, even if this is refused multiple times.
 - Professionals need to be flexible and respond quickly, taking a persistent and consistent approach, particularly when children are likely to be at their most vulnerable.
- Motivational Interviewing should be considered more in CE cases.
- The voice of the child and caregiver should be reflected in plans.
 - Disrupting those who exploit children must be part of intervention plans.
 - Electronic tags were found to be helpful in the view of caregivers and professionals to support monitoring a child.
- Work with caregivers is crucial:
 - Many can feel hopeless and blamed, resulting in them being perceived as 'not engaging'.
 - Practitioners need to work with caregivers in a non-judgemental way to prevent a barrier to effective working.
 - Parent teams made up of qualified clinicians who understand family dynamics could be one option to support and build relationships with caregivers. They can provide support to caregivers to manage some of the behaviours they see in their child, that are a direct result of the exploitation.
 - A whole family approach should be taken to ensure caregivers are part of a plan. Family Group Conferences are one way this can be achieved.
 - Parent Whatsapp groups are thought to be helpful, as they can offer peer support.

- If carers are part of safety planning and implementation, there is a greater chance of success.

Children are neurologically hard-wired to pay far more attention to what parents and caregivers say, than professionals; their thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions matter, and can directly impact the child. Therefore, it is essential that practitioners strive to wrap support around parents and caregivers to enable them to effectively guide and influence their child; in line with a trauma-informed approach.

- Following school exclusions, caregivers reported that their children felt rejected, isolated and this broke some of the friendships. At the point of exclusion, the risk of harm intensifies and should be matched with proportionate response. This suggests that the approach at this time should be about helping children to connect with others and ensuring that intervention leaves the child feeling that it was positive and worthwhile. There must be education in place as quickly as possible. Practitioners should aim to fill the child's time, so they are not available for exploitation.
- Practitioners need to be working with communities to ensure they hold a detailed picture of those at risk.

[SAFEGUARDING ADOLESCENTS: A PRACTICE GUIDE \(Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board on-line\)](#)

This guide identifies a range of ways to work with young people at risk:

- Relationship Based Practice: When working with children, professionals must create meaningful relationships. Professionals should have a good understanding of the child and how they can respond to distress or uncertainty. Some of the skills identified form part of the cultural competence work (interested, accessible etc.). Professionals should work towards building a sense of self efficacy in the child, to help them succeed. Some of the ways professionals can do this:
 - Make use of the child's interests
 - Allow the child to make their own choices
 - Set challenges for the child and encourage them to try
 - Give frequent and balanced feedback
 - Provide coping strategies for stress
- Understanding Trauma
- Using positive language: Language can reinforce the myth that the child is in control of their choices. Professionals should speak to and about the child in a way that is neutral, demonstrates understanding and helps to build self-efficacy.
- Enforcement responses: When a child cause harm, steps will need to be taken in response to this. Consideration should be given as to how enforcement and welfare are balanced.
- Contextual approaches: Working together, agencies can respond to harm that takes place outside the home by:

- Reclaiming vulnerable contexts
- Protecting vulnerable homes
- Peer group mapping, assessments, and interventions
- Moving interventions into spaces where children are (for example, shopping centres, parks) is crucial for creating safe spaces for them. The aim should be to create positive and welcoming places for young people that are protective, and therefore hostile to abuse.
- Effective engagement with children: Working *with* rather than doing *to*, is crucial.
 - Do not start focusing on the consequences of their behaviours during the early stages of engagement (unless there are immediate Child Protection concerns)
 - Listen out for motivation to obtain an understanding of what they want
 - Asking questions that lead to solutions, rather than continuing to focus on the problems
 - Offer a way out
 - Early engagement should be looking for signs they may be ready for change
 - Avoid questioning their decision and instead focus on how they arrive at a decision.
- Quality conversations: These conversations focus on the strengths and assets as well as the risk outside the home.
 - Active listening – choose the right environment, listen to hear.
 - Identify strengths and assets – what matters to the child? What are their hopes? What are their strengths? Who are the trusted people around them? What activities do they enjoy?
 - Let the child take the lead – empower them to solve their own problems through their own reflections and goal settings.
- Strengths based practice: Conversations should be based on recognising what the child is already doing well, and building on these strengths, as opposed to focusing on things they are not going so well.
- Motivational interviewing: This style can help improve the child's motivation and commitment for change.

Desistance

Desistance is the term that is used to describe the process that an individual will go through in order to stop offending. Much of the research in this area has been undertaken with adult offenders, however evidence is emerging into what helps children move away from offending ([HMIP 2016](#)) and indeed many of the same factors that apply to adults are likely to be relevant for children; albeit with consideration given to the developmental needs and differences between both groups. The findings of research studies that have asked adult offenders about what helped them to desist have implications for practice and suggest that:

- Desistance is a process not a one off “light bulb” moment, and there is a need for motivational work to support change which is a dynamic ‘personal journey’ (e.g., 3 steps forward, 7 back).
- A non-judgemental approach is required which considers the use of language, e.g., ‘children and young people’, not ‘young offenders’, ‘harmful behaviour towards others’, not ‘risky young person’, etc.
- Desistance may be provoked by life events, depending on the meaning of those events for the individual. This might include getting a job, entering a relationship, or becoming a parent.
- Desistance may be promoted by someone ‘believing’ in the individual. This underlines the importance of practitioners sustaining an optimistic and persistent approach; and emphasises the importance of relationship building. Practitioners need to be able to demonstrate in a way which feels genuine to the young person, their belief in that young person’s capacity to make positive changes.
- Although the development of better cognitive skills may be a part of the process, desistance probably involves a broader change in how individuals see themselves. This suggests the need for interventions which support positive identities.
- Desistance involves supporting connections to communities, addressing structural inequalities (e.g., poverty, racism, access to education, etc.) and promoting a sense of belonging. In essence, providing an alternative community to belong to.
- Desistance is a process in which the ability to make choices and control one’s own life is first discovered and then used.

To support children desist they need:

- Trusting relationship with at least one practitioner who believes in their capacity to change
- Meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging to family
- Personal relationship and/or becoming a parent
- Changing peer and friendship groups
- Interventions which provide problem solving solutions to use in day-to-day life situations
- Planned and relevant restorative justice interventions.

[\(HMIP 2016\)](#)

Exploited children aspire and need opportunities to help provide a way out. This includes meaningful education, training, and employment. Engaging in positive activities can help a child develop new interests and peers as well as building trusted relationships. Desistance within a county lines context may come from witnessing a violent act, becoming the victim of a crime, or becoming tired and fed up with the activities. Desistance is often a gradual process, which does not occur in a methodical order.

Other [reports](#) identify the difference between primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance is a temporary break in activity. Secondary desistance is longer term where there is a shift in identity, self-belief and behaviours. This is important to hold in mind, when working with exploited

children, given how complex their journeys are. They may wish for the exploitation to stop, but there could be strong push factors hauling them back in, such as debt bondage and the need to protect loved ones.

[USING AN IDENTITY LENS: CONSTRUCTIVE WORKING WITH CHILDREN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM \(Hazel, et al 2020\)](#)

Using the principles of the Nacro-led [Beyond Youth Custody](#) programme (2012 – 2018), this toolkit outlines how these can be applied to working with children before custody to support them towards positive outcomes and prevent further offending. This is a particularly important report for youth justice practitioners, as it covers practice relating to assessment, Referral Order Panels, and work with victims. The paper also includes exercises which support an identity focussed approach.

The 5C characteristics of effective support which are relevant to all identity work with children:

- “Constructive: The overall objective of the diversion support should be to help the child develop their identity, and agencies should consider the purpose of all intervention in relation to that objective. The support should look to the future, rather than focusing on past behaviour in a way that risks underlining the pro-offending identity. The support should motivate the child for change and ensure that it empowers the child to make positive choices (and the more vulnerable the child, the more attention needs to be paid to empowerment). Everyone involved should always look towards positive child outcomes rather than framing discussion around negative deficits (like risk of offending).
- Co-created: A child’s identity is personal to them, and can only be developed by them, so it’s crucial that they are involved with any planning. Such co-creation will also help ensure that the child considers the support as relevant to their needs and future, and so is more likely to engage with it. In addition, we know that everyday interactions are crucial to developing a child’s pro-social identity, so families and friends should be brought on board where appropriate. They can be helpful supporters in motivating and empowering the child, highlighting their strengths, feeding-back to the child ‘who’ they are, and providing roles and activities which reinforce it.
- Customised: As every child’s identity and personal development journey is unique, their diversionary plan and support needs to be individualised. Children should not be fitted to generic interventions. As diversity is crucial to a child’s sense of who they are and their place in the world, considerations of the child’s self-identified characteristics (including ethnicity and gender) are essential in any support package
- Consistent: Understanding and developing the child’s identity should be the focus of all those involved from the start, including YOT agencies, panel members and police officers, who all need to use an identity lens to both look for identity clues and be aware of how their own interactions with the child can underline or undermine pro-social identity development. Where possible, professional support relationships should be stable in order both to help build trust with the child, and to better ensure consistent messages around their strengths and pro-social identity.

- Co-ordinated: In order to achieve consistency in messages to the child, it is important for the support to be effectively managed. Building the route to a pro-social self for the child is likely to involve a number of agencies, possibly across sectors, so work should start early to broker support. Making those agencies aware of who the child wants to be and the constructive developmental journey they are on (rather than focusing on the behaviour/risks to manage) can help engage that support”.

Practitioners should also be ‘identity aware’ in their practice with exploited children. This includes looking for the clues the child may provide about how they see themselves and their position within their world, and the messages a practitioner could be giving to the child about them and their world. It is also worth holding in mind how others around the child may view them. It is critical to not define a child by actions they may have taken.

[UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GANG VIOLENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE VIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS \(Harris et al 2011\)](#)

The main findings around practice concluded:

- Professionals should be cautious about labelling someone a gang member and making assumptions about gangs.
- Important motivations for affiliation with a gang include:
 - Money (for some this was survival and for others it was about making quick money)
 - Protection against victimisation (for some they had a sense of being surrounded by danger. This was amplified by feelings of alienation of other forms of support such as teachers, caregivers and the police)
 - Connectedness (for some there was a sense of belonging)
 - Status and respect (for some this gave them status and respect amongst peers).
- Factors that maintain someone’s membership:
 - Source of money
 - Loyalty and ties
 - Force of habit
 - Being stuck
 - Membership supporting the transition from adolescence to adulthood.
- Interventions should focus on how the above needs and motivations can be met through more pro-social ways.
- Contrasting their sense of change from their old behaviours and values helps them recognise how they have moved on. The idea of achieving status by being above others appears to be a crucial part of this experience.

- Many of the motivations for use of violence (status, money, protection etc.) overlap with patterns of thinking linked to individuals who commit violent acts. This suggests that gang members could benefit from the same interventions as those designed for general violent offenders.
- Interventions which address values and beliefs to support deeper thinking would also be of benefit.

ST. GILES TRUST have had their county lines projects evaluated (Hudek, 2018). In terms of direct practice, some additional points to add:

- Building a trusting relationship with the child is crucial. One of the ways this happens is the professional does not share all the information the child gives – only the pertinent information.
- Cultural competence is an essential feature to build a relationship with a child. This is equally important as the ability to develop good relationships with other agencies.
- The Practitioner can relay information to a child in a way that they find helpful and not patronising. This links back to an earlier point about language. A high degree of flexibility, tenacity and dedication is also helpful.
- The Practitioner understands risk and how this can impact on a child and how they behave. They take this understanding forward in their approach with the child (contextual safeguarding and trauma informed approach). Practitioners should have knowledge and awareness and be skilled at working with children who are exploited.
- Maintaining contact whilst a child is in custody is essential/very important– this is a time when children can feel ‘written off’. Contact can help them to feel valued.
- Cross-border work is important, and practitioners should reach out to others who are working in areas where children are found. This includes working with others who work with missing, exploited, trafficked and serious youth violence teams, as well as the voluntary sector.
- Taking vulnerability as the overarching way to consider the risks to a child and moving away from terms such as ‘county lines’, or CSE.
- Raising aspirations and providing children with the skills to obtain employment in the future, is a vital part of the support that should be delivered.
- Remember to consider siblings and the outer peer group – not only do they need to be safeguarded, but they may also have pertinent information from the things they see and hear.
- Caregivers need support, and this should be included as part of the intervention plan.
- A return home is a reachable moment, and the Return Home Interview provides a helpful opportunity to follow up – make the most of this. Be curious and show an interest, at every encounter.
- Discuss your thoughts with your colleagues (whilst respecting confidentiality) – it is helpful to have a balanced view.
- Ask the child where you can meet them – do not make assumptions about their places of safety.
- If money is tight at home, gently signpost caregivers to services that can help. This can also help build trust.

[WALTHAM FOREST SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD. SERIOUS CASE REVIEW CHILD C \(Drew, 2020\)](#)

This review relates to a 14 year old who was criminally exploited and later was fatally stabbed. In terms of some of the practice learning from this incident:

- Reducing the number of professionals working directly with a child helps to avoid duplication and confusion. Professionals providing direct support should seek advice and guidance from a wide range of partners, including housing. Housing is an important partner to include in multi-agency discussion as they can hold relevant information and have powers to allocate housing stock.
- It is important that caregivers trust agencies.
- The strengths-based model of practice that underpins the [Think Family](#) approach (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) is widely recognised as being a suitable to negate the risks of racial stereotyping that can arise in working with black children and families.
- Children who are vulnerable to exploitation are often safeguarded when in education. A lack of educational provision can lead to unsupervised time for a child, increasing the risk to exploitation. Professionals that recognise this vulnerability of children and respond swiftly and persistently, represent good practice.
- If a child is home educated, the Elective Home Educated Service should be notified if there are any safeguarding incidents that relate to a child. This then should trigger a review of the effectiveness of the home education.
- Professionals must understand the issue of debt bondage when working with CE. The risk must be assessed, and a plan put into place to protect.
- Professionals should consider contextual assessments and association charts (their networks) as these are helpful in terms of understanding risk.

[SHEFFIELD SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BOARD. SERIOUS CASE REVIEW ARCHIE \(Cane, 2020\)](#)

This review relates to the death of a 15 year old male, who was fatally stabbed. Following the death of his sister, within a matter of days he started to get into trouble at school. Mum decided to home educate him as the relationship with the school broke down. Some of the practice learning from this review:

- Too many practitioners involved with a child is not helpful for families and prevents relationships being developed.
- Criminal matters that are delayed can lead children to believe that there is no action being taken. Practitioners need to hold this in mind, and ensure the child is aware that the matter is still being dealt with.
- Missing education is a feature of this report (and many others). Practitioners must work with education to challenge a lack of provision.
- Children who experience trauma should be supported and offered appropriate help. Practitioners should notify education providers about a significant event, such as a bereavement, in a child's life.

- Practitioners should ensure that Child Protection (CP) Plans include focus on the risk outside the home.
- If caregivers do not respond to calls or letter, practitioners should persist and be more creative in attempts to contact.
- Practitioners should hold in mind, that it can often be more effective to refer rather than signpost.
- Following through on things you or your agency says it will do is crucial in building trusting relationships.
- Encourage police to review the risk levels when a child is missing and is at risk of criminal exploitation.
- Practitioners should hold in mind that all plans should link into the CP Plan.

[SERIOUS CASE REVIEW - CHRIS \(Hill, 2018\)](#)

This review explored the effectiveness of the multi-agency risk assessment, intervention and planning for a child who was subject to criminal exploitation. The report identified positive areas of practice:

- Family work: inviting extended family members to appointments to improve and enhance understanding of issues and plans.
- Culturally sensitive approaches: acknowledged, explored, reflected, understood, and responded sensitively to differences with culture and values.
- Practitioners who make extensive efforts to support the child and the caregivers - Even when they were out of area, continuing to see the child and responding to urgent requests when made by the caregiver.
- Practitioners should encourage education to build calming and grounding techniques into behaviour management plans for the child.
- Practitioners should hold in mind, the work with the child must seek to understand that the risk-taking behaviours are often symptomatic of underlying challenges and difficulties, often linked to trauma and the complex world they find themselves in. Successful strategies should be built upon in later plans.
- [Family Group Conferences](#) could be one way to empower families to explore risk and put appropriate plans in place to respond to emerging risk.
- The [AMBIT model](#) (Bevington et al 2017) has also been identified as a possible approach that may work well with a CCE cohort, as it is designed to work with children who have multiple difficulties and are considered high risk.
- [Cure Violence](#) is another promising approach – trusted members of a community take on the role of mediator when violence is predicted to erupt, often through social media. The team help to:
 - prevent retaliations through their work with networks,
 - mediate ongoing conflicts and monitor ongoing issues to ensure they do not escalate.

The report identified also identified:

- Practitioners should be clear about the messages they send out about risk. If a child says they are not safe in an area, Practitioners should hear and act on this. Asking a child to enter an area they have identified as unsafe (for example, the location of an office), can suggest to a child that identified risks are acceptable when adults tell you they are. This could be a dangerous message for children.
- Practitioners should hold in mind that interventions seeking to shock or scare children do not work.
- It can be unhelpful to keep opening and closing cases. Practitioners need to build trusting relationships, instead they can find themselves repeating the assessment process over, rather than developing a richer understanding of what is going on. Genogram / ecomap should be completed to explore relationships and connections in the community – practitioners need to understand their world.
- Referrals and meetings would be more effective if the voice of the child and / or caregiver was heard. Good practice would be to invite them to meetings and include them in the development of the plans. Children and their caregivers need to see that action is taken, at the right time.
- Children can become dispirited and this needs to be seen in the wider context of their engagement with interventions.
- Risk management plans should not just be for the benefit of the agency. For example, a plan may include how they will get to an appointment safely, but what about when they are in the area more generally? There needs to be an overarching risk management strategy.
- Practitioners should hold in mind that if a child does not give information (for example names) this should not be considered non-cooperation, but that it may not be safe for the child to speak.
- Practitioners should know about social media and how the child uses apps. Practitioners cannot use social media content to inform their practice as there is a lack of clear guidance on what is and what is not acceptable from an organisational and legal perspective. Practitioners should proactively engage with children about complying with a social media platform about what is acceptable content (community guidelines) as opposed to telling them not to post inappropriate things and then have them taken down.
- Practitioners should also work with children to educate them on how to report content that is not appropriate.

[EXPLORING THE CHARACTERISTIC PROFILE OF PARENTAL EXPERIENCES OF CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION WITHIN SHROPSHIRE \(Plimmer, 2020\)](#)

This research paper explores the role of caregivers within CE by examining their experiences and those working closely with them in Shropshire. The paper identified five core themes:

- The trauma experienced by the caregivers - This is largely being driven by a sense of fear for the wellbeing and safety of their child and other family members, a sense of loss from a number of things including relationship breakdowns, loss of jobs, reduction in wellbeing and witnessing behaviour changes in their child. Practitioners should hold in mind that caregivers need their own support to effectively manage their own responses to the exploitation.
- The narrative of caregivers – It was felt that there is a story of caregivers being at fault, which can be maintained by services. Expanding on this narrative are numerous grooming misconceptions focusing on the meanings of the term 'grooming' which adolescent males reject

due to its link with the term victim, which can be seen as a term used when talking about females. Many children then deny the abuse they are subjected to. Practitioners need to hold this in mind.

- The changes in personality and behaviour of the child – caregivers reported seeing significant changes in their children. Some of the physical changes they saw included a lack of self-care (not washing, not changing clothes, not sleeping, or eating properly) and changes in temperament (such as mood, temper, and an increase in confidence). These are areas a practitioner should explore with a caregiver – what have they noticed?
- Barriers to professional engagement – caregivers believing that they have not been provided with accurate or correct information. An example of this would be the National Referral Mechanism. Caregivers also reported shame and stigma having agency involvement and how this is a catalyst for realisation for many caregivers that their child is being exploited. Trying to keep a child safe in these circumstances is incredibly taxing for caregivers and many are left feeling isolated. Practitioners should hold this in mind and ensure they provide clear information and signpost to places where further information can be sought. Practitioners should also be sensitive to caregivers who are feeling shame or stigma. Working with parents and including them will help to mitigate some of these feelings. In the same way that we would strive to look underneath the surface of a child's reactions and behaviours to understand what has happened to them, and what might be causing them to act the way they are; the same principle should be applied to caregivers.
- The role of cannabis – this drug acts as a gateway to exploitation. Not only does this drug get children into debt, but they often start selling cannabis before moving onto harder drugs. Cannabis is often in their lives before the exploitation happens, and afterwards as a coping mechanism. Practitioners should hold in mind that addressing concerns about cannabis use, should be picked up as quickly as possible.

[NPIES KEY LINES OF ENQUIRY \(DRAFT\) \(on-line\)](#)

NWG and SPACE have provided helpful practice points for working with families and caregivers:

- Demonstrate that trusted, consistent, relational working with families is key including flexible, confident, and competent workers.
- Recognise and evaluate the positive impact that working with parents as key partners has on the safeguarding of the child, and the disruption and conviction of perpetrators.
- Understand the impact of trauma on the whole family and ensure practice is trauma responsive.
- Create flexible, transparent, integrated, diverse services which value families as critical safeguarding partners whilst recognising their unique role within the partnership.
- Build on a strengths-based approach which enables two-way constructive challenge and support, viewing the family through a human as well as a professional lens.
- Recognise that a differentiated response is needed for families, and that the exploitation cannot be dealt with in isolation.
- Consider how we re-engage families who may not previously have had a trusted, positive relationship with organisations, including signposting to relevant services to gain access to information and services.
- Develop a range of opportunities to hear and respond to the voice of the family; from service planning and evaluation through to the meetings they attend about their child.

- Create advocacy opportunities for families to help them understand what is happening to their child, offer support and to help navigate the safeguarding systems / language we use.
- Reframe the language and ways in which we describe families in assessments, case notes and meetings so as not to blame and punish.
- Ensure assessments clearly differentiate between risk and harm, and that robust processes are in place to reduce the risk and respond to the harm to the child and family.
- Services should clearly outline their remit early on with families including planned and coordinated exits, so expectations are agreed.
- Ensure the safety, welfare, and impact of exploitation on siblings is considered and responded to in order to safeguard them but also to minimise fracture of relationships between siblings.
- Utilise existing disruption tools and legislation to prevent and tackle perpetrators.
- Services need to account for the direct levels of threat and use of violence, both actual and implied, towards family members so need to respond quickly.
- Acknowledge the ever-changing complexities of exploitation and its impact on families, for example debt bondage.
- Ensure transition to adult services is integrated in the safeguarding pathway.
- Recognise the value and importance of 'grass roots' organisations which are embedded in the local community in building and maintaining positive/therapeutic relationships with children and their families.
- The learning offer to professionals should be comprehensive and consistent whilst being flexible, accessible, and dynamic and should target all relevant professional and community groups (e.g., housing officers).
- We need to take the learning from CSE into wider exploitation and share emerging practice.

Families (who are safe) play a key role in helping to stop the exploitation. Consideration should be given to the unique needs of parents and how best they can be supported.

Summary

Innovation is about collective learning, shared passion, and collaborative problem-solving. It is about making the most of opportunities (such as Return Home Interviews / Conversations, arrest, injury etc.) and taking a persistent, non-judgemental approach which demonstrates that you genuinely care, and can be a safe and trusted adult in the child's life. It's about recognising that just because a child has rejected support multiple times, you keep going back as you understand that it may not be safe for them to talk, or they may not be ready to talk. It's about listening and recognising and building on their strengths; it's *not* about chasing disclosures and telling them what to do (often mirroring some of the behaviours they have been subjected to as part of the county lines abuse). Sometimes it's just being there, in their space, at a time that suits them. It's about working at their pace so that they learn to trust again. It is about giving them back some control and a sense of worth. It is about being authentic. It is about being able to make them smile again.

Helpful resources:

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