

Unprotected, Overprotected: Meeting the Needs of Young People with Learning Disabilities who Experience, or are at Risk of, Child Sexual Exploitation

Factors contributing to increased vulnerability to CSE

Young people with learning disabilities are a perpetrator's dream ... they're often lonely and isolated. Many of them have not had a boyfriend or girlfriend but would like one. Many spend a lot of time online. They are less likely to understand that sexual exploitation is wrong and are so easy to groom.' CSE specialist practitioner

- Over-protection and infantilisation = unprotected
- Social isolation
- Lack of empowerment and voice
- A lack of access to information and education on sex and relationships
- False perceptions around sexuality and disability
- Lack of knowledge and awareness of the sexual exploitation of young people with learning disabilities amongst professionals and general public
- General absence of CSE and learning disability training for professionals
- Invisibility of young people with learning disabilities within services.

Challenges to meeting need

Only 31% of local authorities stated that figures were recorded for CSE and young people with learning disabilities [Local authority survey]

- Challenges to identifying young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, CSE
- Gaps in national policy and local implementation.
- Ineffective multi-agency responses and 'working in silos' between child protection and learning disability professionals.
- Low levels of activity to raise awareness of CSE of young people with learning disabilities across different audiences.
- Lack of professional understanding of learning disabilities and CSE.
- Lack of professional understanding of capacity to consent to sex.
- Lack of diagnosis of learning disabilities and challenges to gaining assessment.
- Diversity – need for further consideration of gender, Black and Minority Ethnic communities, sexual orientation and sexual identity.

Supporting disclosures of CSE

- Research provides further evidence of barriers faced by young people with learning disabilities to disclosing abuse and professionals' identification of their abuse.
- Adults, including professionals, not proactively identifying potential signs of CSE.
- Young people with learning disabilities are not always asked about their relationships and risk.
- A burden is placed on young people with learning disabilities to recognise and disclose CSE.
- Young people may not recognise that they are being abused.
- Young people may fear getting into trouble if they disclose.
- When a disclosure is made, young people with learning disabilities are not always believed.
- Crucial importance of appropriate responses to disclosure of CSE.

Direct practice that works well to support young people with learning disabilities

- Recognising the needs of individual young people with learning disabilities .
- Ensuring professionals have a good understanding of CSE and working with young people with learning disabilities.
- Meeting communication and learning needs.
- Building good relationships based on trust.
- Planning sessions with young people.
- Preventative work that includes a focus on sex and relationships, exploitation, using the internet, delivered in an accessible way.

Direct practice that works well to support young people with learning disabilities

- Supporting young people to understand they have been sexually exploited and address its impact.
- Increasing understanding of CSE and risk.
- Working with young people to increase consequences of actions.
- Supporting young people through the criminal justice system.
- Supporting young people with learning disabilities through the transition from children's services to adults' services.
- Providing support once the young person reaches the age of 18.

Working with parents and carers

- Supporting parents and carers to:
 - recognise that their child is experiencing/at risk of CSE.
 - meet their child's needs
 - meet their own needs.

- Working with parents and carers to:
 - understand their child's disability
 - understand the impact of their child's CSE.

Challenges in supporting young people with learning disabilities

- Young people may not recognise that they are being groomed or exploited.
- Challenges to achieve a balance between child protection and children's rights.
- Lack of pre-assessment of a young person's disability or impairment.
- Young people's disability or impairment may prevent them from transferring experience and/or learning.
- Some young people will remain at risk of CSE despite intensive and effective support to meet their needs.

Use of resources to support practice

- Research revealed a lack of specific CSE resources for use with young people with learning disabilities.
- Evidence of existing CSE resources being used effectively with young people with learning disabilities through adapting them to meet individual's communication and learning style.
- Use of basic resources to create a comfortable atmosphere.
- Avoid of a reliance on written information.
- Ensure the 'right' resources are used.



Children & Families
Research



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