

Child Sexual Exploitation – parental/carer awareness



Dear Parent/Carer

I write to you on behalf of the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children Board on the sensitive issue of child sexual exploitation (CSE).

CSE is a form of child sexual abuse that is taking place in all parts of the country. The range of safeguarding partners including schools are working together throughout Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent to tackle CSE in all its forms. However, everyone has a responsibility to protect children and we need your help to keep children safe. So what is CSE? Young people are usually targeted and 'groomed' before being sexually abused. They may be showered with free gifts, money or even think that they are in a 'normal' relationship where they receive special attention. The relationship may develop to the point where a child may be persuaded to send sexual images. Then the relationship changes - and they may feel forced to have sex or send images of themselves on a mobile phone or internet and may feel powerless to say no.

Any child of any age, any gender and of any background can be a victim because all children can be vulnerable. Many share information freely over the Internet and many do not have a full understanding of what a healthy and safe relationship is. With new technologies such as mobile phones and the internet, and research showing that most young people don't question the honesty of the people they speak to so freely online, exploitation may occur without your child's permission or without your child even recognising that they are being exploited.

A new campaign has just launched to raise awareness of the risks that your children may meet, either face-to-face or virtually through social media and the internet, and to provide guidance on what you can do to protect your child. You are in the best position to identify the warning signs of your child being exploited. A change of behaviour may seem like normal teenager behaviour – but it could also be a sign of something more serious. A child being exploited may show any of the following warning signs:

- *Becoming especially secretive and not engaging with their usual friends and family.*
- *Associating with, or developing a new relationship with older males or females.*
- *Going missing from home and school – and being defensive about where they have been and what they have been doing, often returning home late or staying out all night.*
- *Receiving odd calls and messages on their mobiles or social media pages from unknown, possibly much older associates from outside their normal social network. They may also spend more time than usual online or on their mobile phones.*
- *Being in possession of new, expensive items which they couldn't normally afford, such as mobile phones, iPads or jewellery. Suddenly changing how they dress or the music they listen to.*

- *Looking tired and/or unwell, and sleeping at unusual hours.*

You can help to keep your child safe by talking to them and helping them to explore:

- What healthy relationships are and what they are not.
- How to stay safe online – asking them to talk to you about sexting, what websites they go to and for you to stress how important it is to only befriend and communicate with trusted people they know. Ask them: how do you really know the person you're speaking to is who they say they are?
- Assuring them that it's OK to come to you or another trusted adult, including school staff and police officers, if they feel threatened by or uncomfortable about something they have seen or done, or if they think they are being groomed or exploited.

A new website has been set up to help you with this which can be found at www.knowaboutcse.co.uk. I would encourage you to go to www.knowaboutcse.co.uk/parents in particular - which will help you to recognise CSE and unsafe online behaviour, and talk to your child about it. Another area of the site – www.knowaboutcse.co.uk/youngpeople - provides guidance to help young people stay safe online, test whether they are in healthy relationships and recognise the warning signs of sexual exploitation in themselves or friends. The feedback on the website is that it is a useful and practical support for parents and young people and which I hope will be useful to you.

You can also help any child that you have concerns about by reporting your concerns.

There are a number of different ways to report as follows:

- If you believe that a child is in immediate risk of harm, ring Staffordshire Police on 999
- Contact Staffordshire County Council's First Response team on 0800 1313 126 (if the child lives in Staffordshire) or Stoke-on-Trent City Council's Safeguarding and Referral Team on 01782 235100 (if the child lives in Stoke-on-Trent)
- Call the Police on 101 or the NSPCC on 0800 800 5000

Alternatively, you can speak to a member of staff at your child's school for advice.

Protecting children and young people from child sexual exploitation is everyone's responsibility. Thank you for joining the significant efforts being made to tackle it.

John Wood Chair of the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Children Safeguarding

