

Child Criminal Exploitation Assessment Tool



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Introduction

The Child Criminal Exploitation Assessment Tool was developed as part of a Health Care Research Wales funded study into child criminal exploitation in Wales (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). The study examined how young people were targeted, groomed and criminally exploited in Wales and what services need to do to identify, engage and safeguard young people at risk of or being criminally exploited. To do this, young people, parents, and practitioners with direct experience were asked about their experiences of criminal exploitation and what approaches and interventions were most helpful. The results were used to co-produce a toolkit aimed at enhancing practitioner responses to child criminal exploitation (Maxwell et al., 2022). This assessment tool forms part of the toolkit.

Aims

The Child Criminal Exploitation Assessment Tool is aimed at helping practitioners to record their concerns when child criminal exploitation is suspected. It should be used as part of an ongoing approach to recording, assessing and monitoring risk for the young person. It has been developed with reference to study findings, and the wider research literature, including the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse Signs and Indicators Tool (2021).

The assessment tool complements the policy and practice guidance landscape in Wales. It is underpinned by the fundamental need to adopt a child-centred, child rights approach and aligned with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and All Wales Practice Guidance, including guidance relating to safeguarding children who go missing, children who may be trafficked, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.

The Child Criminal Exploitation Assessment Tool should be completed by the lead practitioner with input from other agencies involved with the young person. There are a range of reasons why young people are unwilling or reluctant to disclose criminal exploitation, including fear of repercussions from the people exploiting them and/or fear of practitioner responses such as being criminalised or safeguarding processes. Young people may also not believe they are being criminally exploited. Therefore, child criminal exploitation can be difficult to identify. There is no definitive checklist of warning signs or specific indicators. Some young people experiencing serious harm may initially present with relatively low levels of concern. The risk of harm may fluctuate, and it may take many weeks to build trust and establish rapport before the full extent of risks is identified. Different agencies will hold different information about the young person. This assessment tool provides a method for recording what is known about a young person suspected of being criminally exploited in relation to their:

- Background information.
- Existing vulnerabilities at the individual level.
- Existing vulnerabilities at the interpersonal level.
- Behaviour changes at home.
- Behaviour changes in the education setting.
- Visible indicators of child criminal exploitation.
- Community risk factors.

The assessment tool provides a way of recording emerging concerns as part of an ongoing conversation with young people, their parents and other agencies involved with the young person. It should be used as a way of collating what is known about the young person to aid decision-making at the multi-agency level. In doing so, the assessment tool should inform practitioners about existing concerns, where more information is needed and prompt discussions as the most appropriate actions to safeguard the young person.

Background information

About the young person

Name:	
Date of birth:	
Age:	
Gender:	
Ethnicity:	
Disability:	
Where the young person lives and who they live with:	
Education, employment or training:	
Other agencies involved with the young person:	

Practitioner details

Name:	
Role:	
Date started working with the young person:	

Existing vulnerabilities: Individual level

Historical and background information about the young person may heighten vulnerability to child criminal exploitation including the '8As of individual-level risk' (see Appendix 1 for further information).

Age: Typically 13-18 but can range from young children aged 7 years or under to 25 years.

Abuse: History of physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

Additional needs: Including diagnosed and undiagnosed additional learning needs. Difficulties making friends, overly trusting, easily manipulated, naïve.

Accommodated: Young people who are looked after (now or historically), those in hostels or accommodated following foster care or family breakdown, or unaccompanied asylum-seekers.

Authoritarian: Rigid parenting or reduced liberty (parents, carers or the local authority).

Alienated: Alone, isolated, low self-esteem, low confidence, low social capital.

Adaptive: Targeting ghost children, e.g. girls, locals, high achievers, affluent, college or university students.

Adultification: Young people who are perceived to be more mature than their peers, e.g. black youths, care experienced etc.

Warning signs: Individual level

Missing episodes: Frequent unexplained missing episodes ranging from hours to days or weeks. The young person may go missing during the daytime or overnight.

School exclusion: Excluded from school either temporarily, permanently or voluntarily.

Money: The young person has money that cannot be accounted for. They may provide vague or implausible explanations.

Mobile phones: Having several mobile phones, including burner phones (cheap, prepaid phones). Needing to go out as soon as a call or message has been received.

Existing vulnerabilities: Interpersonal level

Vulnerability at the interpersonal level includes external risk factors that impact the ability to parent, the challenges associated with parenting adolescents, risk arising from unmet parent needs and risk at the extended family level. Parents may refuse to engage with practitioners in case this escalates violence towards their child or themselves.

External factors: Parental separation, loss of parent or sibling, poverty and/or parents having to work long hours, numerous jobs etc.

Parent unmet needs: Parental mental health issues, parent substance misuse, domestic violence.

Parenting challenges: Reduced parental influence over adolescents, difficulties maintaining boundaries, increased influence of peers.

Parenting styles: Authoritarian parenting or lack of supervision, lack of relationship between parents and child.

Criminally exploited siblings: Siblings or other relatives who have been criminally exploited.

Family criminality: Parents, siblings or other relatives have a history of offending.

Fear of exploiters: Parents may appear frightened, unwilling to engage with practitioners and/or reluctant to inform practitioners when young person goes missing.

Warning signs: Behaviour changes at home

The young person's behaviour and relationships may change. Conversely, they may continue to have good relationships with their parents and siblings but be secretive or vague about their activities outside of the home environment. Young people may claim their silence is to protect their family.

Changes in behaviour: Staying out late, missing school, disengaging with hobbies, leisure activities, changes in peer groups.

Running away: Frequently disappears all day or overnight for days/weeks. Vague about where they have been and who they have been with.

Changes in family relationships: Disengagement, aggressive, secretive, vague explanations given as to whereabouts, peers and/or activities.

Dishonesty or vague explanations: Lies, deception or secrecy when questioned about new belongings, whereabouts, behaviour and/or peers. Refuses to talk about activities or explain actions. May sneak out at night and/or deny leaving the house at night.

Power and control: Appear to be controlled by older peers, e.g. summoned by phone calls or text messages. Alternatively, young people may appear overly confident.

Emotional well-being: Nervous, withdrawn, frightened or worried, difficulties sleeping, nightmares. Hypervigilant and anxious about the people around them in the wider community.

Indoctrination: Rejects that parents love them, says that parents, teachers and other adults are against them. Claim that only their new peers care about them and they're a 'new family'.

Warning signs: Education setting

Education practitioners may notice the young person hanging around peers suspected or known to be criminally exploited or being 'exploited victims' where they are manipulated, forced or coerced into criminally exploiting other young people.

Disengagement: New or increased absences from education settings, especially where young people were previously engaging. Withdrawal from school and/or teaching staff and extracurricular activities and clubs.

Peer group changes: Teachers may notice changes in peer groups, especially with older peers and/or ex-pupils or students. Associating with peers who are known to be vulnerable and/or criminally exploited.

Disruptive behaviours: Acting out, challenging teaching staff, and/or authority.

Aggressive behaviours: Aggressive behaviour towards teachers and/or peers, may respond negatively to teachers, boundaries and/or be unwilling to engage with teaching staff.

Alternate behaviours: May change behaviours so previously unsettled young people become well-behaved to avoid being noticed or quiet young people may become overly confident or arrogant.

Emotional well-being (school): Nervous, worried or frightened. May appear scared of certain places or people.

Other behaviours: Young people may appear dishevelled, tired or withdrawn. They may consistently arrive late to the education setting and/or class.

Money or belongings: May have money or belongings that appear to be beyond their financial means.

Warning signs: Visible indicators

Visible indicators include tangible items such as trainers. However, a lack of physical exchange does not mean a young person is not being criminally exploited.

Material items: New belongings, such as trainers, multiple mobile phones, clothing, bikes etc that parents haven't bought or appear beyond a young person's financial means.

Unexplained injuries: Bruising, burns, head injuries/constant headaches, missing fingernails. The young person gives vague explanations for injuries or they 'can't remember'.

Evidence of plugging (storing drugs inside the cheeks, vagina or anus): Has Vaseline, kinder eggs, latex gloves, balloons. There may be blood and/or smearing on their underwear or bedsheets. Boys may be reluctant to admit they have been forced into plugging.

Injuries associated with plugging: Injuries to the vagina or anus. They may have problems using the toilet. Young people may be held down while older youths insert or remove drugs.

Sexual abuse/assault injuries: Injuries to the penis, vagina or anus, including bleeding or discharge. Sexual abuse is used as a form of control.

Self-harm: Including self-inflicted punch injuries. This can be a precursor to more serious violence.

Personal care: Including lack of interest in self-care. Returning home after going missing in dirty clothing and having not eaten for days or weeks.

Cannabis use: New or increased cannabis use, in conjunction with other visible indicators. Young people may be encouraged to use cannabis or increase their use to deceive them into owing the exploiters money (debt bondage).

Community risk factors

Suspicious activities: Young person has been observed coming and going from cars, places or specific addresses suggestive of criminal exploitation.

Suspicious addresses: Young person has been observed or found by the police in a trap house or vehicle associated with criminal activities.

Peers: Young person has disclosed or been observed with peers known to be criminally exploited.

Exploiters/exploiter victims: Young person has disclosed or been observed with older youths or adults who are suspected of criminally exploiting young people.

Older adults: Associating with adults who have recently been released from the secure estate.

Grooming: Young person is taken for days out, bought food or claims to be taken care of by other youths. This can include being given money, belongings or somewhere to spend their free time.

Limited freedom: Older peers appear to be preventing or limiting the young person's movements and/or interactions with others. The young person may be visibly afraid or anxious or being seen talking to practitioners.

Hotspot areas: Young person has disclosed or been observed in hotspot areas or other areas where young people are known to be at risk of criminal exploitation.

Overall assessment

Completion of the assessment tool should provide an overall picture of what is happening for the young person in relation to potential signs of child criminal exploitation.

Summary of evidence: Use this section to summarise and consider all the information collected.

Next steps

The lead practitioner should also consider the young person's unmet needs and level of risk beyond child criminal exploitation. The lead practitioner must ensure the information is considered in relation to whether:

- Safeguarding measures are needed for the young person.
- A referral should be made to children's services.
- There is sufficient evidence for a National Referral Mechanism referral.
- Parents or other family members will be placed at risk if safeguarding measures are employed for the young person.
- The young person has been a victim of crime and the police should be notified.
- Criminal exploitation is suspected but further monitoring is needed.
- Information can be shared with other agencies without increasing risk to the young person and their family.

This information should be used to inform what actions should be taken to safeguard the young person. Further information about the four main actions can be found in Appendix 2.

Action plan

The lead practitioner should develop a plan of **what** actions should be taken, **who** is responsible for each action and **when** each action should be completed. Young people and parents should be made aware of the action plan and be given the opportunity to contribute to what is in the plan.

Actions to be taken...

Appendix 1: The '8As' of individual-level risk factors

The 8As

Individual-level risk factors

- Age**
Young people are typically targeted between the ages of 13 and 18, but there has been a shift to younger children.
- Abuse**
Young people may be vulnerable due to emotional, physical, sexual abuse or neglect.
- Additional needs**
Young people are groomed due to their difficulties in making friends, naivety and in some cases, their thrill-seeking behaviours.
- Accommodated**
Young people who are looked after, including those placed in hostels through family or foster care breakdown, and unaccompanied asylum-seekers.
- Authoritarian**
Young people who are subjected to rigid controls or loss of liberty either by parents, carers or the local authority.
- Alienated**
Young people with low self-esteem and/or confidence including those with low social capital
- Adaptive**
'Ghost young people' (unknown to services). This includes young people from affluent homes, girls, young people excluded from school, and university students.
- Adulthoodification**
Young people who are perceived as more mature than their peers, e.g., Black youth, young people who are looked after.

Appendix 2: Overview of possible actions

Depending on what picture emerges from the completion of the assessment tool, the following actions should be considered.

Further monitoring

If there is insufficient evidence but child criminal exploitation is still suspected, the lead practitioner should obtain more information from the young person, their parents or carers and other practitioners. This should be undertaken in a timely manner as the risk of harm posed by child criminal exploitation can change quickly.

Multi-agency strategy meeting

If there is evidence that the young person may be on the cusp of child criminal exploitation, the lead practitioner has a duty to report this under section 130 of the Social Services Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The lead practitioner should collate information across the multi-agency partners so that a report can be submitted to Children's Services.

Under section 47 Children Act 1989, a multi-agency strategy meeting or discussion must be held when child criminal exploitation is suspected. The section 47 assessment should consider the young person's needs, including what matters to the young person and how they would like to achieve the things they want to do. The aim of the meeting is to share information, identify the young person's care and support needs and develop a plan to reduce the risk of exploitation. This should be irrespective of whether the young person meets service thresholds.

The multi-agency strategy meeting is led by Children's Services and attended by practitioners who know the young person and who are able to share information about exploitation. This includes representatives from education, health, probation or community rehabilitation representative, youth offending, or substance misuse services. There must be at least three different professional agencies in attendance. All agencies must support this process to facilitate the timely identification of the right practitioners.

Consideration must be given to the young person's views either through an Independent Professional Advocate or where appropriate, the young person's attendance at the conference. The young person should understand the purpose of the conference, who will attend and be supported to prepare their contribution. The young person should meet the conference chair prior to the meeting.

Outcomes

Multi-strategy agency strategy meetings should culminate in the production of a coordinated response across agencies. This should include a clear action plan with processes in place to monitor the plan to ensure that it meets the need of the young person and protects them from child criminal exploitation.

Consideration should be given to the complexities of child criminal exploitation and the impact this has on young people and their families. The action plan will need to:

- Address all the young person's care and support needs.
- Adopt a child-centred approach
- Include the wider context for the young person, not just the behaviours or visible issues.
- Be easy to access
- Have clear strategies for working with young people who may not accept or know they are being criminally exploited.

The action plan should be aligned with the needs identified on the assessment form.

Care and support needs

If the multi-agency strategy meeting concludes that the young person has care and support needs, but they do not reach service thresholds, a well-being assessment should be undertaken. The assessment should identify the young person's care and support needs. The assessment should be used to inform the development of a care and support plan aimed at addressing these needs and preventing escalation of risk to the young person.

The care and support action plan must address all the young person's unmet needs. For example, the action plan may be aimed at strengthening positive influences in the young person's life, re-engaging and supporting them to attend education and/or supporting them to attend leisure activities. Where possible, whole family approaches should be included with consideration of what help and support parents can be given to develop their resilience. Our research findings (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021) showed that parents wanted more information about child criminal exploitation and support in maintaining a connection with their child to counteract exploiter attempts at indoctrinating their children against them. Interventions that include parents as part of the solution are associated with heightened effectiveness. This suggests a need for interventions that are appropriate for adolescents and that address risk outside the home. For example, the Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) approach (Jakob, 2018), is an intervention delivered by Child Adolescent Mental Health Service for young people who exhibit destructive and harmful behaviours. It teaches parents a range of techniques, such as de-escalation, increased parental presence, firm responses to acts of violence and continual verbal affirmations of parental commitment to their child.

Care and support plan

If the multi-agency strategy meeting concludes that the young person should be made subject to a care and support plan, the plan should be aimed at keeping the young person safe and preventing further criminal exploitation. It must include the identification of services and interventions that can be used to support the young person and divert them away from the people exploiting them, provided it is safe to do so.

The care and support plan should outline what actions will be taken, who by and when they will be completed. It should include:

- Risks to the young person child and how the plan will protect them.

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- Short-term and long-term outcomes and how the outcomes will reduce the risks to the young person.
 - What support, treatment or therapy will be provided and who is responsible for different actions.
 - How the plan will be monitored and evaluated and who is responsible for this.
 - Timescales.

The care and support plan should also support the family to keep the child safe and support their well-being. It must have clear, specific, child-focused outcomes, clear roles and responsibilities for practitioners and family members.

Working with young people, parents and carers

Irrespective of the type of plan, once it has been prepared and the delivery partners have been identified, the social worker should tell the young person and their family what is in the plan, outline the role of identified agencies and provide a named person they can contact if the young person or their family have questions or issues.

Action plans and care and support plans must have a clear timeframe and list the identified actions along with a named practitioner responsible for each action. The lead practitioner will have overall responsibility for assessing the plan and ensuring that it is delivered on time. They should review the plan with the young person to determine what is working well and what areas of the plan need to be developed or extended.

Immediate risk

If the assessment form reveals that the young person is at immediate risk of harm, children's services and the police must be notified. These agencies can seek an Emergency Protection Order or Police Powers of Protection to move the young person to a place of safety.



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