

**WHAT YOU
NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT CHILD
CRIMINAL
EXPLOITATION.**

Give anonymous information
[Crimestoppers-uk.org](https://www.crimestoppers-uk.org)
0800 555 111

For help and advice
[Childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk)
0800 1111

This leaflet can help you stay safe

Throughout, you'll see different names for 'child criminal exploitation' and this is deliberate to help you remember that it doesn't matter what it's called, it amounts to the same thing. Child criminal exploitation = County Lines = child abuse.

Merseyside's Violence Reduction Partnership has produced this guide to help you understand and identify the signs of County Lines, so you can be better prepared to keep yourself safe and maybe even keep your mates safe, too.



What does child criminal exploitation look like?

Child criminal exploitation is when someone you feel you can trust encourages you, or forces you, to do things which causes you harm. This can include committing a crime for their benefit.

Criminal exploitation can happen to boys and girls, teenagers and also to children under 10 years old.

The list below includes some – but not all – of the things you could be encouraged, or forced to do.

- **Sell drugs.**
- **Carry drugs or money – or store them somewhere.**
- **Carry a knife or gun, or other weapons – or store them somewhere.**
- **Look after weed that is being grown in a house or other property.**
- **Have sex with someone or engage in sexual activity.**
- **Commit theft, robbery or burglary.**
- **Work in unsafe places, like a cannabis (weed) farm or a vulnerable person's home (selling drugs).**

What might happen when people exploit you?

Criminal exploitation can also happen online or anywhere that children and young people go or hang out. Criminals may:

- **'Groom' you by tricking you into believing they are your friend. Grooming can take place over a very long period of time.**
- **Gain your trust, respect and loyalty.**
- **Convince you that they are your boyfriend/girlfriend.**
- **Give you gifts.**
- **Give you money, clothes, food, alcohol, weed or other illegal drugs.**
- **Offer to protect you from others.**
- **Offer you a place to stay.**
- **Make you feel you are wanted and belong in their group or gang.**
- **Encourage or force you do things that are unsafe and can harm you.**
- **Threaten to harm you or your family if you do not commit a crime for them.**
- **Encourage or force you to sell or carry drugs or money for them.**
- **Force you to work for them to pay off the debt if you are holding drugs and they are stolen from you (often they steal it themselves to force you into debt).**
- **Encourage or force you to carry a knife or gun for them.**
- **Encourage or force you to steal or assault someone for them.**
- **Make you feel you owe them for the gifts or the protection they have given to you.**

What is 'County Lines'?

'County Lines' refers to the phone lines that drug dealers use to sell drugs right around the country, not just in Merseyside. Young people can be exploited into selling drugs near where they live, but they may also be forced to sell drugs in towns and places outside of the area, even hundreds of miles away.

This is also called trafficking. When this happens, they may go missing from school or home, and drug gangs will not allow them to return home for many days or weeks. There are loads of different names for 'County Lines' including...

- Gone or going cuntch**
- Going country**
- Grafting**
- Out there**
- Out of town (O.T.)**
- Trapping**

Other names include:

- 'Trap houses' or 'Bandos' refers to the places that young people are sent to, away from their home in order to sell drugs.**
- 'Gaff' can describe a house where there is a party and where drug use is taking place.**
- 'Burner' or a 'Deal line' or a 'trap' or 'Graft phone' refers to the phone that's used to sell drugs.**

What is grooming?

Grooming is when someone pretends to be a friend or someone to trust so they can trick or pressure you into something.

It can be difficult to spot because it usually happens gradually over time, and the person will probably appear kind and caring at first.

It's important to remember that if you are being or have been groomed, it is not your fault.

Where does grooming take place?

Grooming can happen face-to-face or online, or anywhere that children and young people spend time. It happens in all the usual places like parties, parks, on the street, shopping centres, bus stops, local shops, train or coach stations, taxi ranks, amusement arcades, school, sports centres.

What are the signs of grooming?

- They may try to trick or pressurise you by giving you gifts or suggesting you pay back later.
- They may give you money, clothes, food, alcohol, cannabis or other illegal drugs.
- They may trick or pressurise you by making you feel special, loved or protected.
- Your relationship will start to show signs that it is changing as they become more controlling.
- They may ask you to prove you are loyal by asking you to do favours for them.
- They may tell you that you owe them money and need to do things to pay them back.
- They may threaten you or someone in your family.
- Once they have control over you they may encourage you, or force you, to do things that are unsafe or illegal or may harm you.
- You may be encouraged or forced to commit a crime.
- They may ask or tell you to sell drugs or carry money for them.
- They may ask or tell you to carry a knife or gun for them.
- You may be encouraged or forced into sexual activity. They may ask or tell you to have sex with others. You may feel you have to do this. This is sexual exploitation.

The stages of grooming

01. Targeting stage

This is when an exploiter targets a young person who is vulnerable, reducing their chances of getting caught. Exploiters pick their targets based on things like your age, strength or situation.

At this stage, an exploiter might be...

- **Observing a young person.**
- **Finding out a young person's vulnerabilities, needs and wants.**
- **Selecting a young person as a target.**
- **Glamourising their lifestyle.**
- **Gaining and developing a young person's trust.**
- **Sharing information with other members of their gang.**
- **Recruiting a young person to their gang or friendship group.**
- **Marking a young person out as someone to watch.**

02. Experience stage

This stage is where an exploiter might try to get a young person used to their lifestyle, or train them up in what they're doing.

At this stage, an exploiter might...

- **Make a young person feel wanted.**
- **Give them gifts and rewards.**
- **Include them in their activities.**
- **Test out a young person's loyalty.**
- **Listen to a young person and remember what they say.**
- **Offer a young person protection.**
- **Relate to a young person and offer them advice.**
- **Give them a sense of belonging.**
- **Praise a young person.**
- **Give them a weapon.**
- **Introduce a young person to more established members of their gang.**
- **Ask to see and test a young person's skills.**

The stages of grooming

03. Hooked stage

This is the stage where an exploiter will make a young person feel like they're a member of their gang, even though they're just exploiting them.

Signs a young person is in the hooked stage can include...

- **Having an identity in the group and being given a bigger role in the group (e.g. people running for them) or having more money.**
- **Engaging in thrill seeking behaviour or committing low level crimes.**
- **Feeling more powerful (although this may not be the reality).**
- **Feeling they've made progression within the group (although this may not be the reality).**
- **Having a dependency created by their exploiter.**
- **Others may know their name, helping them feel more powerful (but this can result in rivalry)**
- **Being exposed to possible consequences to their actions.**
- **Being given access to information.**
- **Engaging in activities such as drugs, alcohol and sexual behaviour.**
- **Being asked for favours, to keep secrets or to recruit others to the gang.**
- **Becoming involved with trap houses.**

04. Trapped stage

Now a young person feels dependent on the group, their relationship with their exploiter may start to become unpleasant, as their exploiter's true intents or character is revealed.

At this stage a young person may experience...

- Threatening behaviour.
- Attempts to reinforce their dependency or make them indebted to their exploiter.
- Blackmail – includes 'fake' mugging organised to create a debt.
- Physical violence and sexual assaults including strip searches, drugs being inserted for running (plugging).
- People playing on their guilt, shame and fear and attempting to isolate them from their family, friends and society.
- People forcing them to abuse others, assault or even shoot people.
- People humiliating them, either sexually or by exposing their mistakes to others.
- Being made to feel trapped. Involvement in Class A drugs (cooking or running).
- Running a trap house.
- Drug addiction (encouraged by others) or dependency on their exploiter (resulting in them having less money).

Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation is when someone you feel you can trust encourages or persuades you, or forces you, into sexual activity for their benefit. It might be in exchange for presents, money, alcohol or emotional attention.

Sexual exploitation can happen to boys and girls, teenagers and also to children under 10 years old.

It can happen face-to-face, online or anywhere that children and young people spend time.

Like child criminal exploitation, young people who are exploited for sex go through a period of time when they are 'groomed'.

What are the signs of child sexual exploitation?

The signs for child sexual exploitation are a lot like the signs for grooming (on page 07). When young people are being sexually exploited, the exploiter might be...

- **Tricking you into believing they are your friend, boyfriend or girlfriend.**
- **Pretending to look after you and appear kind or loving.**
- **Telling you that they love you.**
- **Gaining your trust, respect and loyalty.**
- **Giving you gifts, money, clothes, food, alcohol, weed or other illegal drugs.**
- **Offering to protect you from others.**
- **Encouraging you, or forcing you, to do things that are unsafe and can harm you.**
- **Encouraging you, or forcing you, to send a nude selfie.**
- **Encouraging you, or forcing you, to participate in sexual activity with them or other people.**

Do exploited people act in a certain way?

You can spot exploitation in friends (or yourself) in a number of ways. Sometimes you may just get a 'feeling' that something isn't quite right, but sometimes there are really obvious signs. The following examples might suggest that someone is being exploited...

- **Becoming more secretive.**
- **Frequently missing from school or home.**
- **Being found out of the area.**
- **Returning home late.**
- **Late to school.**
- **Changes in friendship groups.**
- **Mixing with older men or women.**
- **Talking about people giving free food, alcohol and cigarettes.**
- **Having more than one mobile phone or many SIM cards.**
- **Unexplained amounts of money, mobile phones and credit, clothing, jewellery, new haircuts or other items and gifts.**
- **Receiving excessive calls or messages from unknown adults or friends.**
- **Getting picked up or dropped off in cars by unknown people.**
- **Having a new bike, train/bus ticket.**
- **Talking about going to new places.**

- Talking about being taken to parties, people's houses, unknown areas, hotels, nightclubs, takeaways.
- Having hotel keys/cards or keys to unknown premises.
- Using new street language or responding to a new street name.
- Becoming a gang member or spending time with gang members.
- Carrying a knife, gun or other weapon – or storing them.
- Being scared of others.
- Arrested for criminal activity.
- Arrested for drugs related offences, especially out of the area.
- Being found with large amounts of money or drugs.
- In debt to others.
- Concerns about appearance.
- Mood and behavioural changes.
- Changes in sexualised language or sexual behaviours.
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs.
- Trying to conceal bruises, marks and injuries.
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional wellbeing.
- Sharing of nude selfies.
- Pregnancy or termination.
- Parents or friends are worried.

Recognising unhealthy relationships

Sometimes, it's not always easy to recognise when a relationship is unhealthy or harmful. But it's important to try and recognise when you are being asked to do something which may lead to you being harmed or abused.

An unhealthy relationship may be a sign that someone is beginning to, or planning to, exploit you.

**THEY MAKE YOU
FEEL LIKE YOU'RE
FRIENDS, BUT YOU'RE
NOTHING TO THEM.**

Jaden, 15

It's not okay for someone to...

- Threaten to hurt you if you don't do something.
- Ask you to carry (or store) cash, drugs or a weapon for them.
- Offer you money, drugs, or gifts to commit a crime.
- Offer to protect you from others if you agree to commit a crime.
- Give you gifts in return for you doing favours or for somewhere to stay.
- Check your phone and control who you speak to.
- Demand to know where you are all the time.
- Take you out of the area and away from your friends and family.
- Stop you from going to school.
- Get angry when you want to spend time with your friends.
- Stop you from spending time with your friends and family.
- Blackmail you.
- Shout at you, or call you names, to make you feel upset.
- Threaten to end your relationship if you won't have sex or send a nude selfie.
- Show a nude image of you to others.
- Give you alcohol or drugs in return for sexual acts.
- Make you have sex or do sexual favours with other people.
- Threaten to spread rumours about you.
- Tell you how to dress or what make up to wear.
- Talk about going to new places.

Who do you call for help?

**If you need advice and support,
there are people you can call...**

Childline

Free, confidential advice anytime, whatever your worry, whenever you need help.

0800 1111

childline.org.uk

NSPCC

If you're worried about a child, even if you're unsure, contact our professional counsellors for help, advice and support.

0808 800 5000

nspcc.org.uk

Merseyside Police

You can call on **101**.

If it's an emergency ring **999**.

merseyside.police.uk

DM the police on Twitter or Facebook: **@MerPoICC**

Instagram: **@merseysidepolice**

If you need to report something without anyone knowing you can call...

Crimestoppers

You can share information over the phone or online without being traced.

0800 555 111

crimestoppers-uk.org

Fearless

Fearless is a safe place where you can report a crime, and get information:

fearless.org/en

Find more help at

safeguardingresourcehub.co.uk

Drug gangs are grooming kids in Merseyside.

Know what to look for. Know who to help.

For more information visit

eyes-open.co.uk