

## Understanding Risk and Vulnerability in CSE

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We talk about risk all the time in CSE, but what do we really mean? How have the words 'risk' and 'vulnerability' contributed to the victim blaming of children who have been sexually exploited? How have these words have changed the way we respond to children?

### The Meaning of Risk

*The chance of exposure to something harmful, dangerous, or unpleasant*

*The possibility of harm or danger*

**Synonyms:** chance, potential, possibility, threat, likelihood, prospect

The meaning of risk shows that the word 'risk' is supposed to be used when discussing something that has not happened, started, or begun yet. When professionals talk about risk in CSE, this is not always what is meant. Risk is spoken about as being low, medium, and high, but many of the medium and high rated children are often already being harmed. If professionals are using the word 'risk' to describe children who are already being groomed or abused, is it being used correctly?

### CSE 'Risk Indicators'

The following examples are taken from Derby CSE Risk indicator toolkit:

#### Lower Risk Indicators

- Regularly home late missing
- Overtly sexualised dress, sexual risk taking (including internet)
- Unaccounted increase of goods or money
- Associating with unknown adults
- Reduced contact with family, friends, and support networks
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Experimenting with drugs/alcohol
- Poor self-image, eating disorders
- Self-harm
- Non-school attendance
- Associating with other sexually exploited young people
- Secretive about mobile/more than one mobile
- Late night phone/internet activity

#### Medium Risk Indicators

- Getting in cars with unknown adults and associating with known CSE adults
- Being groomed on the internet
- Receiving reward (money/goods) for recruiting peers into CSE
- Clipping (offering sex for money or other payment and then running before sex takes place)
- Disclosure of sexual assault and refusing/withdrawing complaint
- Reports of being involved in CSE through being seen in hotspots
- Having a much older boyfriend/girlfriend
- Missing school or excluded from school due to behaviour
- Staying out overnight with no reasonable explanation
- Breakdown of residential placements due to behaviour
- Unaccounted for money/goods including mobiles, drugs, alcohol
- Multiple STIs
- Self-harming
- Repeat offending
- Gang member or association

#### High Risk Indicators

- Pattern of street homelessness
- Staying with an adult believed to be sexually exploiting them
- Child under 16 meeting adults and engaging in sexual activity
- Taken to clubs/hotels by adults to engage in sexual activity
- Disclosure of serious sexual assault and then withdrawal of statement
- Abduction or false imprisonment
- Disappearing from the 'system' with no contact or support
- Multiple miscarriages or terminations
- Chronic alcohol/drug use

There is no evidence base for the majority of risk indicators. None of the indicators listed above have an evidenced relationship with CSE. As 'low risk' CSE risk indicators, some would be very difficult to link to being sexually exploited by a third party, and one in particular is a rape myth.

'Overtly sexualised dress' as a risk factor for CSE is a rape myth based on the 'if you are wearing a short skirt or low-cut top, you will attract the wrong attention' narrative. It is very concerning to find a rape myth like this in a risk assessment tool for children. There is also a strong argument that some of the 'low risk' indicators are not at all 'low risk'. For example, professionals have argued that 'associating with other sexually exploited children' would actually put a child at high risk of CSE.

When we look at the medium risk indicators, the concerns continue. There are a number of indicators in this section that are not 'risks' at all but instead are evidence of real harm occurring to the child. Being groomed on the internet for example is already serious harm to a child, thus how could this be a medium risk indicator? In addition, disclosure of a sexual assault and then refusing to make or withdrawing a complaint is not a 'medium risk indicator' for something that has not yet happened, it is evidence that the child has been sexually abused by someone.

Finally, we come to the high-risk indicators; all of which are beyond risk. All of these indicators are evidence of current occurring harm. A child under 16 years old meeting adults for sex or being taken to clubs and hotels by adults to engage in sex is evidence of significant, repeating harm to the child.

Evidence of risk indicators is lacking, despite professionals using them every single day in practice. Risk factors are routinely mixed up with vulnerabilities in many areas of practice. Lots of risk factors in medium and high categories should not be defined as 'risk' at all – they are evidence of the harm already occurring, not that the risk might happen in the future. In the UK, there are over 25 risk assessment toolkits which use upwards of 110 risk indicators for CSE, despite none of them being tested or validated for use with children.

**To conclude, risk indicators, are rarely indicators of potential harm to a child.**

## The Meaning of Vulnerability

Much like risk, the word 'vulnerability' is used frequently in CSE, usually to describe and discuss children who may have been sexually exploited or abused. In a similar way to risk, the word 'vulnerability' is often misused which has led to entire bodies of work, assessment tools and reports that assert that vulnerabilities lead to CSE. The following are definitions of vulnerability:

*The quality/state of being exposed to possibly being attacked or harmed (physically or emotionally)*  
*Vulnerability is the state of being open to injury/harm or appearing as if you are to a third party*

**Synonyms:** In danger, at risk, endangered, unsafe, unprotected, ill-protected, unguarded; open to attack, attackable, assailable, exposed, undefended, unarmed

When we begin to explore the definitions and synonyms of vulnerability, we see that the word is supposed to be used when someone is in a state which means they are exposed or open to harm or damage of some kind. When we consider this in the context of CSE, some 'vulnerabilities' make sense, but some lose their context and logic. Some 'vulnerabilities' become far-fetched and tenuous, such as moving up to secondary school and having access to a smartphone. These are not in themselves, vulnerabilities to being sexually exploited.

## CSE 'Vulnerabilities'

The following are examples of some of the commonly considered vulnerabilities to CSE:

Natural Vulnerabilities	Additional Vulnerabilities	Mythical Vulnerabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking risks</li> <li>• Experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and sexuality</li> <li>• Rebelling against carers</li> <li>• Staying out later</li> <li>• Meeting new people</li> <li>• Rejecting authority</li> <li>• Vulnerable to flattery</li> <li>• Secretive</li> <li>• Peer pressure</li> <li>• Internet use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling isolated</li> <li>• Looked after children</li> <li>• Being bullied</li> <li>• Poor parenting/protection</li> <li>• Unstable family/friend networks</li> <li>• Previous abuse</li> <li>• Going missing a lot</li> <li>• Homeless or sofa-surfing</li> <li>• Existing dependency</li> <li>• Learning disabilities</li> <li>• Exploring sexuality/gender identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mythical Vulnerabilities</li> <li>• Having an adolescent brain 'addicted to risk taking'</li> <li>• Adolescents are more impulsive than adults</li> <li>• The brain is immature because of age (it will mature with age and puberty)</li> <li>• The brain will be completely developed by adulthood, adolescent risk will reduce</li> </ul>

First, all children are vulnerable to being sexually abused by adults because children are surrounded by, controlled by, brought up by and taught by adults. Therefore, if a sex offender is in their support network, they don't need any further vulnerabilities because simply being a child will be enough.

Secondly, natural vulnerabilities are being problematised, measured and assessed as problems rather than natural parts of childhood and adolescence. An example of this is the way 'taking risks' has been turned into a problematic behaviour that needs to be solved or stopped, despite most if not all adults recognising that they took multiple risks as part of their own upbringing. The field of CSE has become more and more risk averse to the point that all types of developmental risks are seen as problematic rather than seen through the lens of development and identity formation as children learn about the world.

The most commonly discussed vulnerabilities to CSE tend to come from the additional list. These vulnerabilities are seen as leading to or exacerbating CSE of children because the child is seen through the lens of the deficit model of safeguarding. When a child is being bullied for example, professionals perceive the child as wholly vulnerable and open to sexual exploitation, despite there being little evidence that they are related at all. Rather than seeing the child as a whole person who is being bullied by one person, the bullying is seen as the main part of the child and assumptions are made that they are then vulnerable to everything else.

Finally, the mythical set of vulnerabilities have very little evidence at all, but due to the rise in neuroscience, there are many myths about brain development that have affected professional practice. Neuroscience is likely to teach us much about child development and psychology, but it often has small sample sizes and immature evidence bases. Neuroscience is still in its infancy, and extreme caution must be exercised before making claims about the brain and the way this translates into vulnerabilities of children.

Research in cognitive psychology since the 1970s shows that people are irrational much of the time. Adolescents are specifically accused of impulsivity, risk taking and peer conformity, but adults of all demonstrate the same traits. Individual differences beyond age 12-14 are not strongly related to age. We cannot predict how adolescents think, feel, act, reason or reflect by examining their brains. It is important to remember that claims about the relative size and merit of the brains of various sorts of people have long provided a pseudoscientific basis for oppression of women, racial minorities and others with brains deemed inferior. The case against teen brains is no stronger.

Research has identified only three ‘vulnerabilities’ that have any correlation with experiencing CSE:

1. Previously experienced sexual abuse
2. Having a disability
3. Being in looked after care services

Earlier and current literature on CSE focuses heavily on the ‘vulnerabilities’ of the child. However, whilst children who are sexually exploited may have experienced other issues in their lives before the sex offender targeted them, it would be premature to link these as causal, or in some cases even correlational. Studies such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study frequently find that over 70 per cent of adults report at least one adverse childhood experience and over 12 per cent report more than four. This means that, statistically, a large majority of children in the population have experienced harm or trauma but have not gone on to experience CSE.

A child might experience multiple harms or vulnerabilities but will not be sexually exploited unless a sex offender targets them. If there is no sex offender, there will be no sexual offence against the child. The sex offender operates independently using their own motivations coupled with the utilisation or creation of an opportunity to abuse, which may or may not include the child’s existing experiences. This means sex offenders may know and choose to use the child’s adverse experiences to groom or control them, or they may not know (or not need to know) about any previous or current experiences, because they aim to create a new experience, such as offering drugs or alcohol, that was not already a feature of the child’s life.

Despite CSE practice creating a focus on particular vulnerabilities, all children are vulnerable to CSE. Vulnerabilities are not a pre-requisite or predictive of child sexual abuse or exploitation. Children can have a number of vulnerabilities but if a sex offender does not target them, they will not be abused or exploited.

## Impacts On Practice

Humans want answers to why children are being abused and it is very difficult for humans to accept the huge number of children who are sexually abused in society. CSE and CSA is a complex societal problem, but all of the risk comes from the sex offender. When a problem feels this difficult to solve and the topic is so stigmatised and surrounded by taboo, humans seek a simple answer, even when it is incorrect. Non-abusive adults struggle to understand why a person would harm a child, so they also struggle to find the right answer to the problem, due to lack of understanding of the motivation of the offender.

Humans are scared of unmanageable danger, and it is hard to accept that harm and danger is constant. It is hard to live our lives being constantly afraid that anything could happen to us at any given time. To accept that there are thousands of sex offenders in our communities, ready to abuse children is very scary. It would mean exploring and understanding the reasons why the offenders develop their offending behaviours and conduct them. Whilst there is a large body of research in the psychology of sex offenders, there is not necessarily an ‘answer’ to sex offending.

One of the ways we protect ourselves is to reach a conclusion that harm only happens to certain people, e.g., ‘only to girls’ or ‘only to the working class’ or ‘only to people from that estate’. This also leads us to assume that people from ‘other’ groups that are different from ourselves are more likely to commit sexual offences against children than people from our own groups. When we create stereotypes, we create a schema in our mind of what abuse is, who experiences it and who commits it. As a result, children’s lives and behaviours are seen as risks and vulnerabilities rather than the sex offender being seen as the risk. Professionals therefore become more focussed on the characters of children and then develop strategies, programmes and resources that focus on changing the child to ‘keep them safe’. Ultimately, professionals try to pinpoint risks that the child took or vulnerabilities in the child’s life or character that ‘led to’ being sexually exploited rather than accepting that the sex offender targeted them because they wanted to.

## How Can We Improve Practice?

- Stop using language that blames the child or places responsibility on the child, e.g., phrases like 'risk taking behaviours that led to CSE' or 'vulnerabilities that led to being abused'
- Be more critical of risk indicators, and learn about the evidence base for them
- Stop calling children 'low, medium and high risk' when they are already being harmed
- Remember that vulnerabilities do not lead to CSE, children can have multiple vulnerabilities and never be sexually exploited
- Place all of the responsibility on the sex offender and not on the child
- Encourage colleagues to realise that all risk of CSE comes from the offender and not from the child



For more information about risk and vulnerability in CSE or victim blaming, please visit [www.victimfocus.com](http://www.victimfocus.com) or contact Dr. Jessica Taylor - [jessica@victimfocus.org.uk](mailto:jessica@victimfocus.org.uk)