

# Risk assessing child (sexual) exploitation

Dr Helen Beckett

Director, The Safer Young Lives Research Centre

@uniofbedsSYLRC

Slides should not be reproduced without permission of author

- Consider learning around CSE risk assessments – and relevance to other forms of harm
- Critiques of issue-specific risk assessments & appropriateness of use
- More holistic assessments of risk/harm
- But first: why does this matter?

# Why does this matter?

- This is not a theoretical debate
- Conceptualisation, assessment processes and resultant labels impact upon the service a young person receives (or doesn't!)
- How we label/respond to/engage with a child or young person significantly impacts on their life, both in the short-term and the longer-term
- Current risk assessments risk 'screening out' young people experiencing harm/in need of intervention → continued or escalating harm

# Risk assessment/screening tools

- CSE risk assessment/screening tools used across UK – vary by area
- List of ‘risk indicators’ – note if present/absent; possible scoring of these – informs ‘grading of risk’ & response
- Variable recording of qualitative contextual information & integration of professional judgement across different risk assessments
- CCE/CE tools remove ‘sexual’ reference, but largely replicate
- Different tools for HSB/DA/SYV/CSA

# Why is the current approach problematic?

- Inconsistent tools and application (between areas and between professionals)
- Gendered basis for which ‘issue’ to consider & which tool to use?
- Predicated on particular (outdated/adult) models of harm/abuse
- ‘Screening out’ children being harmed who don’t fit these (or demonstrate the included risk indicators)
- Often based on single point in time, single professional assessment
- Actions linked to thresholds

# Why is the current approach problematic?

- Little evidential basis for included indicators (Brown et al 2017)
- Many relate to expected adolescent behaviours
- May indicate something is wrong, but do not tell us what
- Conflates ‘risk factors’ and ‘warning signs’
- Conflates ‘risk’ and ‘actuality’ (cases of known harm being assessed as ‘high risk’)

# Why is the current approach problematic?

- Focuses on risks and vulnerabilities of child – victim blaming?
- Child seen as ‘high risk’ rather than the situation
- Where are strengths and protective factors?
- Where is the actual source of risk?
- How is professional judgement considered?
- What if known harm that doesn’t ‘tick the right boxes’?

# The significance of vulnerability

- Increases risk but not a pre-determinant of abuse.
- Those with no previously recognised vulnerabilities also experience harm
- Vulnerability only relevant because there is someone willing to exploit them & inadequate protective structures to mediate against the risk
- See interconnected conditions for CSE (next slide)

# The interconnected conditions for CSE



Beckett 2011, 2016;  
text adapted to  
'source of harm' in  
2019)

# So what now?

- No easy answers – this is not simply about tweaking existing tools
- Various strands of work looking at this, including:
  - Barnardo's
  - UoB Contextual Safeguarding programme
  - TCE Support Programme
- Review existing risk assessments – test them by changing features of the abuse
- Put in a ‘safety net’ so issue-specific risk assessments are not the key determinant of assessment/intervention (or lack thereof) – encourage professionals to expand on professional judgement/explain why different to assessed level of risk
- Ensure assessments consider all inter-connected conditions of abuse/wider contexts within which these exist
- Be led by the situation/the needs of the child, rather than the framing of the issue (see key questions slide)

# Risk assessment review

- Does it adequately explore all elements of the interconnected conditions of abuse (including context within which these exist)?
- Where it locates responsibility for harm?
- Why and when would you complete it?
- Rationale for what is included/excluded? Evidence base for this?
- Is it specific to the form of harm it is trying to risk assess?
- Does it capture all manifestations of harm equally?
- Does it potentially ‘screen out’ anyone?
- The relationship between vulnerability factors and risk indicators?
- Appropriateness of language/descriptors?
- Differentiation between ‘risk’ and ‘actuality’ – what is it indicating?
- Whose views inform it? (where are young person/family views in this?)
- What happens post completion – who sees it; how often is it reviewed? (risk is live, not static)
- RiP (2017): is professional judgment enhanced by, not undermined by, it?

# Key questions to consider

## Five core questions (Rip 2017)

1. What does this young person need?
2. What does this young person need me to think about?
3. What does this young person need me to do?
4. How will I know risks are reducing?
5. What support do I need?

## GIRFEC planning (Scotland)

1. What is getting in the way of this person's wellbeing?
2. Do I have all the information I need to help?
3. What can I do now?
4. What can my organisation do to help?
5. What additional help, if any, may be needed from others?

# TCE Year 3 work

- Not about creating a new risk assessment, but supporting areas to reflect on their use of issue-specific risk assessments
- Map existing work in this field
- Roundtables to identify common learning/shared principles
- Develop sector-facing output to support critical thinking around risk assessing child exploitation/extra-familial harm.

For more information and resources visit our websites

[www.beds.ac.uk/SYLRC](http://www.beds.ac.uk/SYLRC)

<https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk>

[Helen.beckett@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Helen.beckett@beds.ac.uk)