

research  
in practice



The  
Children's  
Society



Tackling Child Exploitation  
Support Programme

# Child Exploitation: Definition and language



Department  
for Education

Funded by the Department for Education

[www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk)

## Introduction

This briefing summarises the key messages from the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme's work on the definition and language of child exploitation.

At the outset of the Programme, we identified questions of language and definition as important in understanding our responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. We noted that there were 'significant definitional issues' regarding the different types of exploitation, their relationship to one another and the relationship to other forms of exploitation and abuse. We suggested that '*Definitional boundaries are blurred, permeable and contested*'.

These issues have continued to emerge as significant as TCE has delivered Bespoke Support Projects to local areas throughout England. The language that is often linked to or associated with child exploitation is also developing rapidly, with terms such as 'complex safeguarding' 'contextual safeguarding' 'transitional safeguarding' and 'extra-familial harm' increasingly part of the strategic and operational vocabulary.

The term 'child exploitation' is increasingly used as an umbrella term<sup>1</sup>. The different forms of exploitation which are or are not included within this definition have significant implications for the way in which partnerships are developed and decisions made to design and develop services. At the same time, we are aware that we may interpret and apply these terms in different ways, which may affect how we work with colleagues in other services.

The language of child exploitation and safeguarding is not, therefore, an abstract issue, but something that can be important for the way that work takes place across services to protect children.

---

1. See, for example, National Crime Agency (2021) National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime. Available at: <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/533-national-strategic-assessment-of-serious-and-organised-crime-2021/file>

In order to explore these issues further, we carried out a rapid review of the academic, policy and practice literature<sup>2</sup>. We aimed to answer six questions:

- > How are different forms of child exploitation defined in legislation and policy?
- > How have these different definitions evolved over time and in different professional domains, and what is the significance of this for current policy and practice?
- > What are the implications of current language and definitions for children and young people who have been exploited or are at risk of exploitation?
- > What are the implications of changing language and definition for strategic leaders developing local policy and services relating to child exploitation?
- > What evidence exists regarding the views of children and young people, parents and carers regarding current definitions/language relating to child exploitation?
- > What evidence exists regarding the views of strategic leaders and frontline professionals regarding current definitions/language relating to child exploitation?

From our analysis of the literature, we have identified the following key messages regarding the language and definition of child exploitation. We hope these will provide a starting point for discussion, and there are some questions to help you reflect on how these issues influence safeguarding practice.

---

2. The full briefing with all references will be available via the TCE microsite <http://www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk>

## [Just over] ten things you need to know about language and child exploitation

1. The language we are now using about child exploitation is new – it has only emerged during the first 20 years of the 21st century. The **histories** of the different issues we now know as child exploitation and extra-familial harm – child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, modern slavery – have left their mark in the way people think and talk about child exploitation. These histories also relate to the way we think about childhood and youth.
2. As current guidance<sup>3</sup> and definitions state, **child exploitation is a form of child abuse**. The language we use about child exploitation is part of our national conversation about child abuse and safeguarding. Over time, that conversation has led to different forms of child abuse becoming more or less prominent in policy and practice at different times. Currently, much of that focus is on child exploitation and extra-familial harm.
3. The introduction of new terminology to describe different forms of child exploitation is not just about finding new words to describe problems that have existed for a long time. By naming and re-naming social issues, **we are finding ways to draw attention to these issues**, and asking that attention is given to them – from policy makers, funders, services, the general public, research. This has been very helpful, but a focus on single types of exploitation can mean that we lose sight of the relationships between different forms of abuse, and the ways in which they can intersect within the lives of individual children and young people.
4. **All forms of child exploitation are very complex in their own right**. As they have been recognised as serious forms of harm, there has been more and more research and discussion about the nature of different types of child exploitation, their prevalence and also whether they actually exist in the way they are defined in policy and legislation. The knowledge base has improved greatly, but there are still many gaps.

---

3. Beckett, H., Holmes, D. and Walker, J., 2017. *Child sexual exploitation: definition & guide for professionals: extended text*. University of Bedfordshire. Available at: <https://www.beds.ac.uk/media/86735/uob-rip-cse-guidancefeb2017.pdf>

5. The fact that the language of child exploitation is relatively new means that it can be difficult for people to understand, and people may interpret the language differently. **Part of the task of introducing a new language is therefore to explain and communicate what the language means.** This can be challenging and will usually require a range of forms of communication – so, for example, TV drama and media commentary have been very important in communicating what is meant by child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and modern slavery.

6. **Language is not neutral.** The growing attention given to different forms of child exploitation, and the presence of this language in different social spaces and through different media, means it becomes attached to other issues and is described in different ways, depending on the communicator and the perceived audience. While **this can be positive in informing people, it can be dangerous when the language of exploitation is deployed to label or target particular groups. The language of child exploitation is not, therefore, just about the terms ‘child sexual exploitation’ ‘child criminal exploitation’ ‘modern slavery’ – but also how people attach different ideas to these terms.** This means that some young people might be viewed as more likely to be victims of certain forms of exploitation – for example, girls viewed as more likely to be sexually exploited than boys. This also means that the complexity of the issues can be missed – including overlapping and intersecting abuse and exploitation within the life of an individual child, and the possibility that the young person is both a victim of, and perpetuating, abuse.

7. Naming an issue also means **we think we are able to identify who is affected.** In relation to child exploitation, this includes identifying who is a victim, and who or what might be responsible – while keeping in mind that this could be the same person. At the same time, the development of these new categories also **excludes** people who do not fall neatly and easily within them. The categories of child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and modern slavery enable us to articulate different forms of harm, but there is considerable variation in how the definitions are understood and applied. Other factors, including gender and ethnicity, also affect the ways in which young people who approach services are assessed and directed into different service routes.

8. **The language of child exploitation also becomes embedded in our systems and practices.** Policies, risk assessments, team names and other forms of paperwork have adopted the language of child exploitation. This requires professionals to practice in accordance with current definitions of these issues. This is helpful in developing shared and consistent responses. At the same time, it may impede professional curiosity when the issues presented by a child or young person don't quite fit the categories or is understood differently. This suggests it is important to remain critical and aware of the way that language is being used to describe different forms of child exploitation.
9. As the language of child exploitation becomes more taken for granted, it can also suggest that **there is a consensus about the categories we are using. In fact, there is a great deal of disagreement about whether 'child exploitation' 'child sexual exploitation' 'child criminal exploitation' 'modern slavery' represent helpful ways of thinking about what happens to children.**
10. Researchers have asked **if the types of child exploitation we are currently using are too big and therefore too vague** – and so become meaningless as a way of thinking about this form of child abuse? In response, some people argue that we should return to more generic categories of child abuse and safeguarding responses. Others argue that what is needed are more sub-categories that enable us to pinpoint more accurately what is happening to children. Increasingly, new frameworks of thinking – for example, contextual safeguarding and complex safeguarding – are being used as new ways to think about the spectrum of different types of exploitation and extra-familial harm and how they overlap and intersect the lives of individual children and young people, their families and communities.
11. The language we use about different forms of child exploitation is changing all the time. **This conversation is not over!**

## Questions for reflection

- > In your experience, how do the current definitions of different forms of child exploitation reflect the ways in which children and young people are abused and victimised? Does the language help or hinder effective safeguarding practice?
- > To what extent do professionals from different backgrounds and experiences view child exploitation differently? What ideas are attached to different forms of child exploitation? To what extent does this affect the safeguarding response?
- > To what extent is it helpful to question and critique current definitions of child exploitation?
- > To what extent, in your experience, are individuals challenged when they use language in relation to child exploitation that is inappropriate or discriminatory?



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.  
Connect via Twitter using #TCEProgramme to share your ideas.**

---

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme  
The Granary Dartington Hall  
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692  
email [ask@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:ask@researchinpractice.org.uk)  
 [#researchIP #TCEProgramme](https://twitter.com/researchIP)

[www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk)

**Author:**  
Dr Isabelle Brodie

Research in Practice is a programme of  
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company  
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.  
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756  
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:  
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,  
Totnes TQ9 6EL