

CSE Research: Short films for practice Research Briefing Note #2



Child sexual exploitation: a social model of consent Professor Jenny Pearce, OBE

Summary of the film text

"This film proposes a 'social model' for understanding why a child or young person might appear to be consenting to sexual exploitation and abuse. 'It's a life style choice', 'she was wearing short skirts', 'he was experimenting with his sexuality': all too often the focus and attention has been on the behaviour of individual children and young people, rather than assessing the impact of the environment surrounding them.

The social model of consent to abusive sexual activity presents four areas where professionals and others supporting the child could actively focus their attention to understand the context of the abuse. They could look at whether the child or young person is:

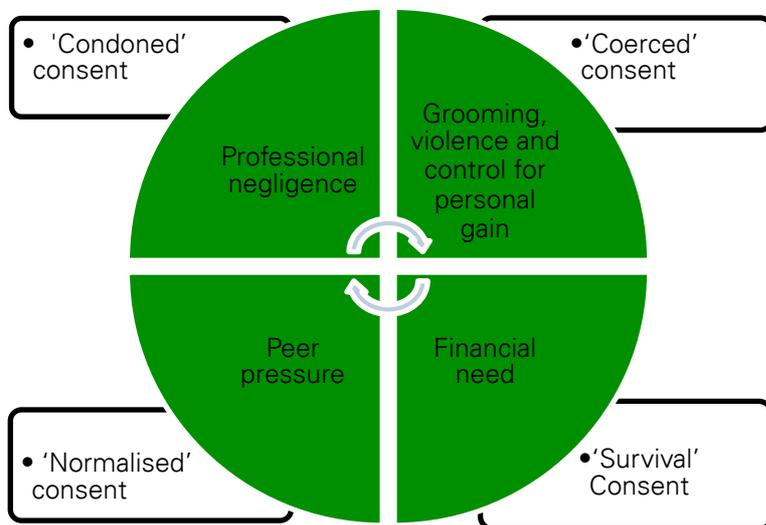
- 1. Being groomed into sexual exploitation and abuse by adults or other children;*
- 2. Experiencing poverty and therefore engaging in what has been termed 'survival sex';*
- 3. Influenced by the 'normalisation of sexual violence' as projected through violent pornography and/or through peer group patterns that accept violence as part of everyday life;*
- 4. Overlooked or ignored by a culture of 'wilful ignorance', where professionals or others in contact with the child turn away from the truth of what is happening.*

We have to reform our child protection systems to engage with and address these external influences on children and young people who are often inappropriately blamed for apparently consenting to sexual exploitation."

Research Summary

Despite pockets of good practice, many children are still perceived to be, and understand themselves to be, responsible for consenting to sexual activity that is abusive and unlawful. Coy *et al* (2013) note that the dominant discourse of consent places the onus on the child to 'give' consent, rather than challenging when and how others take responsibility for 'getting' consent. In the UK, Gillick competencies and Frazer Guidelines are used to help professionals assess whether a child can understand advice, is likely to begin or continue with sexual activity irrespective of advice and/or whether they cannot be persuaded to consult their parents or carer. This 'individual approach' focuses the professionals' attention

on the child and their capacity to understand. While this is important, it overlooks a focus on abusive contexts surrounding the child. In contrast, the social model of consent places the child in the centre, but expects assessments to consider the social and environmental pressures on the child.



Social model of consent

Coerced consent. The process of grooming children for sexual exploitation often involves gaining their trust and making them feel loved before the relationship becomes sexually abusive and controlling (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013).

Survival consent. Commonly called ‘survival sex’ within adult sex work/prostitution discourses, this acknowledges that some young people might be using the constrained and limited choices available to them to swap or sell sex for clothes, accommodation and/or money (Scott and Skidmore, 2006).

Normalised consent. Sexual violence and coercion can be normalised through access to violent pornography (Horvath *et al.*, 2013) and/or living in environments such as gang-affected neighbourhoods where sex is used as a weapon (Beckett *et al.*, 2013).

Condoned consent. Wilful ignorance is the denial of any sensory input that appears to contradict one’s inner model of reality. Research shows that even if there is evidence that a child is being abused, some practitioners, or the institutions within which they work, will remain ‘wilfully ignorant’ and turn a blind eye to the abuse (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Pearce, 2013; Jay, 2014).

Questions for practice reflection

You may want to discuss or consider the following:

- Are you working with any children who appear to be consenting to sexually exploitative relationships? Are there any signs that they are being groomed? E.g.

having unexplained expensive gifts and being particularly secretive about who they are spending time with.

- If there is evidence a child is selling or swapping sex as a means of survival against poverty, what support can be provided to address their material needs?
- What messages about sex and relationships dominate the child's environment? How might this help you understand the way the child views what is happening to them?
- What pressures or challenges in your professional life and environment might lead you to 'wilfully ignore' the signs that a young person may be being abused?

**Is there someone you know who would benefit from seeing this short film?
If so, take a minute to pass it on <http://youtu.be/1oyE-qE4340>**

To cite this film

University of Bedfordshire (2015) *Child sexual exploitation: a social model of consent*. Available at: <http://youtu.be/1oyE-qE4340> (Accessed day, month, year).

References

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The International Centre

Increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking

The International Centre at the University of Bedfordshire is committed to increasing understanding of, and improving responses to, child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking in local, national and international contexts. This is achieved through:

- academic rigour and research excellence
- collaborative and partnership based approaches to applied social research
- meaningful and ethical engagement of children and young people
- active dissemination and evidence-based engagement in theory, policy and practice



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Staff at the International Centre work collaboratively in teams with internal and external staff on applied research, evaluation, consultancy and training. We prioritise a focus on children and young people's participation, taking this seriously in all aspects of our work.

The University of Bedfordshire has been awarded the Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education for The International Centre's pioneering research into child sexual exploitation. This prestigious prize is the highest form of national recognition open to higher and further education institutions in the UK.

What is Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)?

The following definition of CSE is that used in the government guidance 'Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation' (DCSF, 2009, p.9)

Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.