

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FOLLOWING A SERIES OF DISTRESSING, HIGH-PROFILE CASES OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN 2013, KATE TOWNSHEND INVESTIGATES HOW SCHOOLS CAN CONTINUE TO HELP KEEP YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE IN A SHIFTING SOCIAL LANDSCAPE...



It's one of the hardest – and most essential – parts of any teacher's job. Child protection training is always a stark reminder of the darker realities any of the children we teach could be facing, as well as our responsibility to ensure that they don't have to face them alone. But over the last couple of years, many teachers will have been aware of a new horror gaining increasing significance in training sessions – that of Child Sexual Exploitation.

So what is Child Sexual Exploitation? And what makes it distinct from other forms of abuse? The National Working Group for sexually exploited children puts it like this: "Sexual exploitation of children and young

people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people 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."

And hard as it is to imagine, even after recent high profile news stories, the evidence seems to suggest that Child Sexual Exploitation can rear its ugly head anywhere, from leafy, suburban schools to inner city London. With a peak age of

15 and victims ranging from as young as 10 right up to 19, there is no doubt that it really is an issue that secondary schools are uniquely placed to tackle.

As with all forms of abuse, prevention tends to be better than cure. And the first step towards prevention is often raising awareness about the subject. *Chelsea's Choice* is a play produced through a partnership between Just Whistle, an organisation that campaigns against Child Sexual Exploitation, and AlterEgo Theatre Company.

The play, which has toured secondary schools around the country, focuses on the story of a young girl who is drawn into a relationship with an older man, and the

consequences of this. Sean McGrath, Creative Director of AlterEgo, explains what makes it a particularly effective way of raising this issue with children and young people:

“Child Sexual Exploitation can be a very difficult issue for teachers to cover. There’s a sense that it’s taboo, and there’s also an awful lot of different elements to it. A play can pack in lots of information in a time effective way and teachers can then use it to kick start other conversations.”

In the case of *Chelsea’s Choice*, there’s also an element of children going on a journey alongside Chelsea, which Sean believes makes her plight seem all the more real to them. “The play offers children a vicarious experience,” he explains. “Young people make mistakes alongside Chelsea so they don’t have to make them in real life. We deliberately perform the play at ground level as we want it to be a visceral, hard hitting experience.”

And apparently it is, as Sean reports that both teachers and pupils are often moved to tears by the play, which also offers a plenary session in which children can ask questions or raise any points that have been brought up.

A one off experience like *Chelsea’s Choice* can obviously be a fantastic and memorable way for schools to open up conversations and thinking about Child Sexual Exploitation. But to be truly effective, this needs to be followed up. Sex and Relationships education within schools can be a crucial way to teach children about what a healthy relationship looks like, and to help them spot the signs should they find themselves in one that isn’t.

The Sex Education Forum is the national authority on Sex and Relationships education (SRE) in schools and offers some key advice for ensuring provision is up to scratch. In particular, it points out the need for children and young people themselves to be involved in designing the content of lessons, as well as for “a developmental curriculum” – one that responds to children’s changing needs and circumstances. In recent years, this has meant the addition of discussions around consent and what it means to SRE discussions.

The Sex Education Forum is also keen to emphasise the idea that SRE in schools can be hugely enriched by different professionals and agencies working in partnership to prepare and equip children as well as possible, and this idea of collaboration is one that Michelle Barry, who works with schools in Southampton as part of the Star (Southampton Together Against Rape) project, is also a passionate advocate for:



KEY ADVICE FOR TEACHERS FROM MICHELLE BARRY OF THE STAR PROJECT:

- ★ **Make sure the issue is on the school agenda. Don’t make it taboo.**
- ★ **Work with external agencies – people who are the experts.**
- ★ **Make young people aware of the support that exists and how to access it.**
- ★ **Put the issue in context. Don’t be tempted to scaremonger, as children still need to know that the majority of people are good.**
- ★ **Push for extra support and training if you need it.**
- ★ **Be clear about your school’s safeguarding policy and keep abreast of local and national guidance.**

“Schools can be perfectly placed to deal with issues around Child Sexual Exploitation, but not always properly equipped. Outside agencies bring greater expertise and support to schools – for teachers as well as for pupils.”

Specifically, Michelle believes that outside support can give teachers greater confidence to continue work with their students. And for pupils, a ‘real life’ element can exist with staff from other organisations, which perhaps isn’t present with the teachers they see every day.

This idea that children and young people need to see Child Sexual Exploitation as a problem that affects real people and could therefore affect them too is another reason why Michelle argues that schools need to be open about the issue. “We need to de-stigmatised conversations about abuse and unhealthy relationships,” she points out. “Making it a community matter means that children will be aware of the support that exists. And because children often learn from, and listen to, their peers, they are more likely to be able to help each other if these conversations are out in the open.”

Of course, sometimes, despite excellent SRE and wide ranging external support and training, the worst may still happen. So how can you be vigilant and spot the signs before a child is too far through the grooming process?

Carron Fox, from the charity Barnardos, is

clear that the longer exploitation goes unnoticed the deeper into it a child can be pulled. To stop things getting to this point she suggests some key signals for teachers and other professionals to look out for:

“Because schools see children every day they can be critical when it comes to preventing abuse. Look out for gifts that children are keen to show off, older boyfriends, or young people seeming more tired than usual.”

Carron also agrees with Michelle that children can sometimes be key in identifying abuse themselves. “Once someone is being groomed, they are often systematically removed from their support networks. Be aware if children are saying one of their friendship group has fallen out with or lost interest in the rest of them.”

Teachers also need to be aware of the danger of children being drawn into exploitative situations online. Clare Lilley, online safety expert from the NSPCC, warns that it’s important not to ignore the technological element. “The internet in particular has the ability to facilitate anonymous contact,” she explains. “Children can be shown and desensitised to pornography before they’ve ever met up with someone in person. We need to build children’s digital judgment alongside their confidence offline.”

Both Barnardos and the NSPCC offer further information for teachers concerned about children in their care on their websites, as well as their own training materials for use in schools. In fact there’s a whole host of information available online, from the Sex Education Forum factsheet on good SRE to NHS advice on further signs that may suggest a child is being abused.

The key thing is that even when it’s hard to accept that such a thing could happen, teachers and schools need to actively seek out the expertise and support that’s available. Because when children don’t realise they’re entering into an exploitative relationship, it’s hard for them to be proactive in seeking help. As their teachers, we have a responsibility to be proactive on their behalf.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kate Townshend splits her time between teaching and freelance journalism, thus ensuring that life is interesting but busy! She has written for a variety of publications including TES magazine and Teach Primary. She lives in Cheltenham in a pastel coloured house with an indulgent boyfriend and too many books.



DID YOU KNOW?

- ★ **Not all victims of CSE are female – boys can be targeted too.**
- ★ **CSE can happen to any child, including those from loving and/or well off families (although statistically, ‘looked after’ children are at greater risk).**
- ★ **Victims of CSE are never ‘asking for it.’**

Children cannot consent to their own exploitation.

- ★ **CSE is not restricted to urban areas. Cases have been found all over the country.**
- ★ **CSE can happen in a variety of ways. Some cases may be perpetrated by individuals, others by organised gangs.**