



EVALUATION OF THE NSPCC'S PROTECT & RESPECT CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION GROUP WORK SERVICE

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NSPCC

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Impact and Evidence series

This report is part of the NSPCC's Impact and Evidence series, which presents the findings of the Society's research into its services and interventions. Many of the reports are produced by the NSPCC's Evidence (formerly Evaluation) department, but some are written by other organisations commissioned by the Society to carry out research on its behalf. The aim of the series is to contribute to the evidence base of what works in preventing cruelty to children and in reducing the harm it causes when abuse does happen.

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The people pictured are models.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse (DFE, 2017). It is a process that involves the exchange of a resource for sexual activity with a child or young person. The recipient of the resource could be the child or young person with whom the sexual activity takes place. It could be a third party who is able to control the child or young person (DFE, 2017, p5). While the phenomenon of child sexual exploitation is not new (see Hallett, 2017) use of the term ‘child sexual exploitation’ is. The term appeared in government statutory guidance for the first time in 2009 (DCSF, 2009). The 2009 guidance gave Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) in England responsibility for protecting children from sexual exploitation and preventing it (DCSF, 2009). The guidance led to professionals, statutory services and third sector organisations developing responses and services focused on sexual exploitation (Walker et al, 2019; Barnardo’s, 2019; The Children’s Society, 2019; Harris et al, 2017; Shuker and Harris, 2018).

In 2014, the NSPCC started an evaluation of its Protect & Respect programme of child sexual exploitation services, which were provided from 15 service centres located in towns and cities in England and Wales. This report presents detailed findings from the evaluation of the group work delivered as part of the programme. It is a companion report to a report, which discusses the key findings from the evaluation of the Protect & Respect programme (Williams, 2019a). An additional companion report presents detailed findings from the evaluation of a one-to-one work service, delivered as part of the programme (Williams, 2019b). An unpublished rapid evidence assessment (REA) on services for children affected by sexual exploitation has been also been produced (Walker et al, 2019¹). The NSPCC commissioned the REA because it wished to understand how its evaluation of the Protect & Respect programme could add to the existing evidence.

NSPCC Protect & Respect Programme

The aim of the Protect & Respect programme and the evaluation was to create a set of intervention models for working on sexual exploitation, and to deliver the first impact study of intervention models focused on child sexual exploitation. One element of the programme was the delivery of group work to children and young people who were considered to be vulnerable to exploitation. The aim

1 This report is available by request to: researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk

of the group work was to lower the risk of sexual exploitation in the medium to long-term. This was to be done through providing access to information, advice and guidance so that children and young people could make what was termed as ‘safe decisions’ (NSPCC, 2014, p1). Group work was delivered by 13 of the 15 NSPCC service centres that delivered the programme.

The initial intention was to carry out an impact evaluation. A first step towards conducting the impact study was an attempt at implementing the services in line with the model guidance and the administration of a set of standardised measures. It was felt that if the models could be delivered consistently and the measures administered then an impact study could be conducted with a control group. However, a review conducted one year into the delivery of the programme concluded that the programme was not yet ready for this. Hence the aims of the evaluation were amended to studying and documenting:

- The work that was done, in practice, by NSPCC practitioners with children and young people, carers and professionals.
- The challenges faced in assessing, preventing and stopping exploitation and what was done to attempt to overcome those challenges.

The data collected for this evaluation report comes from interviews with 33 NSPCC staff but also from: interviews with four children and young people and 10 referring professionals; a review of case notes written by NSPCC practitioners; and quantitative data collected on the characteristics and needs of the children and young people allocated to the service, length of service, service and evaluation attrition. The findings in this summary cover the period between June 2014 and November 2017.

A note on language

Risk avoidant actions

The Protect & Respect programme aimed to reduce the likelihood of children and young people being exploited partly through providing direct support to them. In particular the programme was designed to improve children and young people’s ability to take actions, which could help reduce the likelihood of their being involved in situations and relationships, where the risk of sexual exploitation was heightened. In this way the programme was focused on working with and through children and young people’s agency. During the delivery of the Protect & Respect programme experts and researchers working in the field of child sexual exploitation developed a critique of interventions focused on teaching children and young people

risk-avoidant actions. It was suggested that in focusing preventative initiatives on educating children and young people, professionals placed the responsibility for keeping safe on the children and young people rather than on the people who perpetrated exploitation or on the adults whose role it was to keep children safe from exploitation (Eaton, 2017; Eaton and Holmes, 2017). The NSPCC recognises that there is merit in the point that children and young people should not be made to feel responsible for exploitation. It has also recognised that it has used terms, which on reflection, were felt to be unsatisfactory in that they implied that:

- It was within the power of the child or young person to stop exploitation.
- Children and young people had a responsibility for avoiding situations where they could be exploited.

Since the beginning of the development of the programme the NSPCC has moved on from the use of such terms and has sought to develop a language, which communicates that:

- The responsibility for exploitation lies with those who perpetrate it.
- The responsibility for safeguarding children and young people lies with carers and child protection professionals and agencies.

However, whilst the NSPCC has been keen to adopt a language which removes responsibility and blame from children and young people it maintains an open mind as to the possibility that educating children and young people and supporting them to take risk-avoidant action could play a limited role in helping to reduce victimisation. In this report the author describes attempts to build children and young people's skills to take what are termed 'risk-avoidant actions'. This term 'risk-avoidant actions' is used without meaning to imply that children and young people have a responsibility for avoiding or lowering the risks of exploitation posed to them or that children and young people are to blame for being in situations or relationship where the risk is heightened or where exploitation occurs.

Key findings from the evaluation of the group work

Scale: In total, 714 children and young people were referred and allocated to the Protect & Respect group work service during the period of the evaluation. Eight out of 10 children and young people allocated to the service, and whose gender was known, were female (n=420 from 505).

Needs: In principle, the group work service was to be targeted at children and young people who were considered vulnerable to but not at risk of exploitation. In practice, children and young people accessing group work had a range of needs including having no vulnerability or risk, being vulnerable, being at risk of exploitation and being exploited. In some cases, boys were referred and selected for a group because it was felt they posed a risk of exploitation. They were not mixed with children and young people who were felt to have been vulnerable to exploitation.

Informing and consent: In some cases, children and young people were selected for and asked to attend group work without being informed about the service or without giving their consent. Where this happened NSPCC practitioners made it clear to the children and young people that they had the freedom to say no to participating in group work. In some Centres staff added an introductory session to the group work to inform children and young people about what the work would entail.

Approaches: In practice, the aims and approaches to working with children and young people varied across the groups. Approaches could place different amounts of emphasis on:

- Providing information to children and young people.
- Promoting reflective group discussion on the topics.
- Encouraging children and young people to identify the topics that the group would focus on.

Group session number: Programme guidance for the group work stated that work should be provided across six sessions. In practice, the number of sessions that groups ran for varied between two and nine.

Children and young people's participation and experience: Children and young people's engagement with and participation in group work discussions varied and was influenced by factors such as: how their day had gone; the level of stress and adversity they faced in life generally; and relationships with other group members. When children and young people did contribute, they gave their views and opinions on topics, and reflected on their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Children and young people's comfort with sharing personal views and experiences was said to be related to how they felt about group members, the NSPCC practitioners, and listening to other people share their experiences.

Children and young people's level of satisfaction and their level of comfort with the group work experience varied. The things they could enjoy and value included: finding out about issues relating to sexual health, relationships and sex because they had not previously

been able to discuss these topics with adults; and sharing personal experiences and problems, as for some the group represented the only opportunity they had for a safe space in which they could discuss their problems and issues without fearing condemnation or criticism.

Children and young people could express discomfort with the group work in various ways, including: slumping in seats; raising questions about how long the session was going to last for; lack of engagement with group discussion; having a ‘couldn’t be bothered’ attitude; being in low mood or tired; making it clear that they had never wanted to be in the group; throwing furniture around; sitting with their coat tucked closely to their chin; playing with a phone; leaving the group; and missing sessions. Smirking, laughing and giggling during discussions could indicate embarrassment with the topics. Some children and young people were said by practitioners to have found it difficult watching videos dramatizing incidents of child sexual exploitation when doing so raised awareness of the risks they faced in their lives.

Change and outcomes: Several outcomes were identified for children and young people from the group work, including experiencing improvement in understanding, awareness and a preparedness to take actions, which practitioners felt lowered the risk of exploitation. Some practitioners felt that this could serve to reduce the risk of exploitation faced by the child or young person and improve their wellbeing. However, there could also be negative outcomes for children and young people, which included becoming hypervigilant after receiving information about grooming, which then stopped them from forming a friendship; and becoming distressed when information shared within the group was shared with people outside of the group.

NSPCC practitioners gave a variety of answers when asked if, generally speaking, they felt group work lowered the risk of exploitation, including: hoping it had lowered the risk of exploitation, but unable to point to the evidence for this; feeling confident that it had lowered risk; feeling unsure; not knowing, as they would not know what happened for the child or young person after the group work had finished; feeling sure that the child or young person was at the same level of risk as before.

Where NSPCC practitioners felt that group work had helped to decrease the risk of exploitation for children and young people, they felt it did so by:

- Raising awareness of how grooming worked.
- Improving awareness of personal vulnerability to exploitation or risk of being exploited.

- Raising expectations about healthy relationships and the right to consent.
- Improving ability to recognise feelings of anxiety and fear.
- Improving preparedness to take action were the children and young people to find themselves in a dangerous situation.
- Triggering actions to reduce the amount of personal information made available on social media.
- Heightening determination to reject offers of relationships from strangers.

While NSPCC practitioners and children and young people felt that having the opportunity to learn about exploitation was a good thing, doubts were also raised as to whether this could lower the risk of exploitation. This was based on an understanding that factors, which heightened the risk of exploitation that were beyond the influence of the group work had not changed. These factors included:

- The widespread and constant harassment of girls by boys for naked images and sexual activity.
- The normalisation and acceptance of sending, receiving and handling naked images among children and young people.
- The culture of attending parties and informal gatherings involving alcohol and inebriation where boys would wait until girls got drunk to assault them.
- Community and familial values that did not respect a female's right to have her consent sought before sexual activity was initiated.
- Being neglected by carers, which meant the validation and acceptance provided by people who exploited felt like the best thing on offer to children and young people.

Discussion

The findings from this evaluation of the Protect & Respect group work programme have been fed into a discussion of practice and policy debates in the discussion report (Williams, 2019a), suggesting for example that:

- There may be a limited role for teaching risk-avoidant actions in prevention, and testing is needed.
- More work may need to be done to engage boys.

Chapter 1: The Protect & Respect Programme

Introduction

This is a report on the findings from an evaluation of a group work service delivered to children and young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation. It forms one of three reports that have been published together, all of which are focused on the NSPCC's Protect & Respect programme of services designed to support children and young people affected by sexual exploitation. Readers with an interest in the programme are advised to consult the discussion report first (see Williams, 2019a). It summarises the key findings from the programme, including the key findings from this report. It also provides detailed information on the policy and practice context and the methodology used to evaluate the programme, as well as a detailed discussion of the implications of the evaluation findings for policy and practice. This report serves as a detailed companion report to the discussion report, providing more detail on the implementation of the group work service. The third published report is also a companion report to the discussion report and provides detailed findings from the implementation of the one-to-one work (Williams, 2019b). An unpublished rapid evidence assessment (REA) on child sexual exploitation service responses has been also been produced (Walker et al, 2019²). The NSPCC commissioned the REA because it wished to understand what its evaluation findings could add to the existing evidence.

This introductory chapter sets the context to the report by:

- Providing a note on the NSPCC's position on the use of child sexual exploitation films and the lessons that the NSPCC has learned over the course of the programme.
- Explaining the NSPCC's position on children and young people's agency, the use of victim-blaming language and the lessons that the NSPCC has learned over the course of the programme.
- Summarising the current definition of child sexual exploitation.
- Describing the guidance provided to NSPCC managers and practitioners on providing the Protect & Respect group work service.
- Providing a brief note on the evaluation methodology.

2 This report is available by request to: researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk

- Aiding the reader’s understanding of this report by providing an explanation of some of the language that is used in this report on ‘vulnerability’ and ‘risk’.

Information on the following can be gained through reading the introduction chapter to the discussion report (Williams, 2019a):

- A summary of recent policy developments in the area of sexual exploitation.
- A summary of the evidence base for the effectiveness of professional responses and services in working on sexual exploitation.
- A description of the NSPCC’s recent involvement in working with sexual exploitation and the reasons for establishing the Protect & Respect programme.
- A description of the evaluation methodology used.

A note on child sexual exploitation films

Prior to and during the course of the evaluation of the Protect & Respect programme, a number of agencies in the UK, including the NSPCC, created films containing dramatised accounts of grooming or child sexual exploitation. These films were used in the Protect & Respect programme with children and young people with the intention of raising their awareness of how grooming and exploitation worked. In 2018 (the year following the end of the evaluation data collection period), a campaign was launched to stop professionals showing dramatised accounts of grooming and exploitation to children and young people. The campaign was accompanied by a report. Drawing on what the report author acknowledged was a limited evidence base around ‘trauma informed practice’ it reasoned that showing children and young people dramatised accounts would be likely to harm them (Eaton, 2018; 2019).

In reflecting on the concerns raised by the campaign the NSPCC has recognised that its use of child sexual exploitation films in the Protect & Respect programme may have caused distress for some children and young people and therefore could have caused harm. The NSPCC is in agreement with the view that child sexual exploitation films should not be used if they are going to cause harm. However it acknowledges that there is a place for using appropriate film in work with children and young people as long as this meets specific criteria. To this end, the Protect & Respect service has agreed to sign up to the working principles identified by Barnardo’s in its ‘basic practice checklist for schools work on child sexual abuse’ (Barnardo’s, 2018). Points that the checklist requires practitioners to address include:

- Preparing children and young people so they are aware and ready for the content and have been given the option of saying no to the work.
- Ensuring that resources that include ‘victim-blaming language’ are not used.
- Ensuring films that depict scenes of explicit abuse stories or scenes of violence are not used.

A note on agency and the use of ‘victim-blaming’ language

The Protect & Respect programme aimed to reduce the likelihood of children and young people being exploited through providing direct support to them. In particular the programme was designed to improve children and young people’s ability to take actions, which could help reduce the likelihood of them being involved in situations and relationships, where the risk of sexual exploitation was heightened. The guidance provided to NSPCC staff was premised on the theory that:

“If the young person has timely and proportional access to information, advice and guidance they will be able to appropriately process it in order to make safe decisions... The young person will have a greater understanding of sexual exploitation and the grooming process, and so be less vulnerable to sexual exploitation.”

NSPCC, 2014, p1

During the delivery of the Protect & Respect programme NSPCC workers, in line with the model guidance, attempted to deliver interventions, which were designed to improve children and young people’s ability to avoid or withdraw from situations and relationships which heightened the risk of exploitation. However during this time academics and researchers working in the field of child sexual exploitation began to develop a critique of such interventions. It was suggested that by focusing preventative initiatives on educating children and young people, professionals placed the responsibility for keeping safe on children and young people, rather than on the people who perpetrated the exploitation or on the adults whose role it was to keep children safe from exploitation (Eaton, 2017; Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Placing the responsibility on the child or young person, in turn, was said to lead to the child or young person feeling to blame for exploitation where it occurred (Eaton, 2017; Eaton and Homes, 2017).

The NSPCC recognises that there is merit in the point that children and young people should not be made to feel responsible for exploitation. Terms like ‘keep safe work’, ‘safe decisions’, and ‘risky behaviour’, used in NSPCC guidance and sometimes by NSPCC staff, were on reflection, felt to be unsatisfactory in that they implied that:

- It was within the power of the child or young person to stop exploitation.
- Children and young people had a responsibility for avoiding situations where they could be exploited.

Since the beginning of the development of the programme the NSPCC has moved on from the use of such terms and has sought to develop a language, which communicates that:

- The responsibility for exploitation lies with those who perpetrate it.
- The responsibility for safeguarding children and young people lies with carers and child protection professionals and agencies.

However, whilst the NSPCC has been keen to adopt a language which removes responsibility and blame from children and young people it maintains an open mind to the possibility that educating children and young people and supporting them to take actions, which reduce the risk of exploitation, could play a limited role in helping to reduce victimisation. In this report the author describes attempts to build children and young people’s skills to take ‘risk-avoidant actions’. The term ‘risk-avoidant action’ is used without intending to suggest that children and young people:

- Have a responsibility for avoiding or lowering the risks of exploitation posed to them.
- Are to blame for being in situations or relationship where the risk is heightened or where exploitation occurs.

Child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse (DFE, 2017). Over the last decade a definition of sexual exploitation has been provided by each of the governing authorities from across the United Kingdom’s four nations. Beckett and Walker (2018, p11) state that common to all four nations’ policy positions is a recognition that exchange is key to differentiating between CSE and broader definitions of child sexual abuse. Whilst exchange of a resource for sexual activity with a child is central to the current definition of child sexual exploitation the recipient of the resource can vary.

The recipient could be the child or young person with whom the sexual interaction takes place or a third party who sells sexual activity with the child or young person. This can be seen in the definitions provided in England and Wales, the two nations where the Protect & Respect programme was provided during the period of the evaluation. Guidance for England defines child sexual exploitation as being:

“... a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity

(a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or

(b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.”

DFE, 2017, p5

It adds:

“The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”

DFE, 2017, p5

Guidance issued from the Welsh Assembly Government, which at the time of writing is currently under review (Hallett et al, 2017) states that:

“Child sexual exploitation is the coercion or manipulation of children and young people into taking part in sexual activities. It is a form of sexual abuse involving an exchange of some form of payment which can include money, mobile phones and other items, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, ‘protection’ or affection. The vulnerability of the young person and grooming process employed by perpetrators renders them powerless to recognise the exploitative nature of relationships and unable to give informed consent.”

Welsh Assembly Government, 2010

Beckett and Walker (2018, p11) also point out that common to all four nations' policy positions is a recognition that CSE:

- Is an umbrella term covering many different manifestations of abuse; both contact and non-contact.
- Can affect both males and females.
- Can be perpetrated by a range of abusers – male/female; adult/peer; any social class or ethnicity, operating alone, in groups or organised gangs.

Whilst use of the term 'child sexual exploitation' first appeared in statutory guidance in 2009 the phenomenon of child sexual exploitation has been documented as far back as 100 years ago (Hallett, 2017). Prior to 2009 the term commonly used to describe child sexual exploitation was 'child prostitution' (Hallett, 2017; Phoenix, 2012). In 2009, a switch to 'child sexual exploitation' was made to promote an understanding that children involved in exploitation were 'victims of abuse' rather than 'criminals' (Sparks, 2000; DOH, 2000, p10; Beckett and Walker, 2018). Beckett and Walker (2018) point out that because early definitions of child sexual exploitation were created to foster a move away from use of the term 'child prostitution' the concept of exchange, which made child sexual exploitation different from child sexual abuse, referred to financial gain only. However in the years since the birth of the concept of 'child sexual exploitation' the notion of 'exchange' has been widened to include other types of gain including love, acquisition of status and protection from harm. Widening the concept of exchange in this way has caused some to question the value of the concept of child sexual exploitation, given that exchange can be found across many types of child sexual abuse, many of which wouldn't be considered exploitation (Beckett and Walker, 2018, pp13-15). The key question is whether the presence of exchange within a sexually abusive relationship presents distinct challenges to identifying, preventing and stopping abuse, that make it useful and meaningful to draw out child sexual exploitation as a distinct sub-type of child sexual abuse. The findings in this evaluation report speak to this question and a discussion of the utility of the concept of child sexual exploitation is held in in the discussion report (Williams, 2019a).

The definition of child sexual exploitation used in the United Kingdom can be contrasted with the definition used in other places. Europol, the European Union's law enforcement agency, rather than treating child sexual exploitation as a sub-category of child sexual abuse, equates child sexual exploitation with child sexual abuse:

“Child sexual exploitation refers to the sexual abuse of a person below the age of 18, as well as to the production of images of such abuse and the sharing of those images online.”

Europol, 2019

The United Nations, too, have adopted a more expansive notion of sexual exploitation, directed both at adults and children, which includes all forms of child sexual abuse:

“The term “sexual exploitation” means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.”

United Nations, 2003

A note on language on vulnerability and risk

This evaluation report uses the term ‘being at risk of exploitation in the medium to long-term’, which should be contrasted with the term “being at risk of exploitation in the short-term’. Being at risk of exploitation in the short-term should be taken to mean having an increased chance of exploitation happening within the next month when compared with the average child or young person. Being at risk in the medium to long-term should be taken to mean being judged to have an increased chance of exploitation happening within the next six months (i.e. in the medium term) or any time up to the end of the young person’s childhood (i.e. in the long-term), when compared with the average young person.

Use of the term ‘being at risk of exploitation in the medium to long-term’ was useful for understanding the aim of the group work, even though the model guidance for the group work didn’t use the term (NSPCC, 2014). Model guidance stated that group work was to be provided to young people who were considered ‘vulnerable’ to but not ‘at risk’ of sexual exploitation. The aim was to lower the risk of exploitation for children and young people who attended the work. The model guidance used ‘vulnerability’ to mean there was a risk that the child or young person could be exploited in the medium to long-term. Being ‘at risk’ was used to mean that there was a risk that the child or young person could be exploited in the short-term. In other words it was intended that group work would be targeted at children and young people who were not likely to be exploited in the short-term but who, when compared to the average child or young person, were felt to be more likely to be exploited in the medium to long-

term. The aspiration for lowering the risk referred to lowering the risk of being exploited in the medium to long-term.

In places the report author has preferred use of the term 'being at risk in the medium to long-term' to 'being vulnerable'. This is because whilst during the programme the term 'vulnerable' could be used to refer to being at increased risk of exploitation in the medium to long-term, it could also be used to refer to the causes of that risk. That is to say, vulnerability was sometimes used to refer to a characteristic that in theory, made it more likely that a young person would be exploited in the medium to long-term. One such example was having a 'learning need'. Use of the term 'vulnerable' to refer to the phenomenon of risk and the causes of that phenomenon created the possibility for conceptual confusion, which was avoided by explicit reference to 'risk of exploitation in the medium to long-term'.

The Protect & Respect programme

In 2014, the NSPCC started an evaluation of its Protect & Respect programme of sexual exploitation services, which were provided from 15 service centres located in towns and cities in England and Wales. The aim of the programme and the evaluation was to create a set of intervention models for working on sexual exploitation, and to deliver the first impact study of intervention models focused on child sexual exploitation. The programme comprised one group work service and four types of one-to-one work delivered to children and young people aged 11 to 19:

- **Preventative group work** aimed at reducing the risk posed to children and young people in the medium to long-term, of children and young people judged to be vulnerable to exploitation. The group work was to be delivered over six weekly sessions.
- **Four types of one-to-one work:**
 - **Preventative work**, which had the same aim as the group work.
 - **Risk reduction work** aimed at reducing the risk posed to children and young people judged to be at risk of exploitation in the short-term.
 - **Child protection work** aimed at stopping the exploitation and reducing the risk of exploitation of children and young people judged to be being exploited.
 - **Recovery work** aimed at reducing the trauma and risk of being exploited for children and young people traumatised because of exploitation.

A review conducted one year into the delivery of the programme concluded that the programme was not in a position to deliver on the ambition of an impact study. This was because, in practice, the service delivery models were not consistently being delivered according to programme guidance. The review findings triggered a decision to amend the aim of the evaluation to studying and documenting:

- The work that was done, in practice, by NSPCC practitioners with children and young people, carers and professionals.
- The challenges faced in assessing, preventing and stopping exploitation and what was done to attempt to overcome those challenges.

Group work

The purpose of this section is to detail the aims and objectives of the Protect & Respect group work service. This section also explains the instructions that NSPCC practitioners were given for providing group work. The aims, objectives and instructions provided to NSPCC practitioners were contained within two guides issued to NSPCC practitioners during the period of the evaluation. The first guide was written and circulated in May 2014 by a senior manager with responsibility for the development of the Protect & Respect programme (NSPCC, 2014). The second guide was written in late 2016 by two practitioners from an NSPCC service centre with experience of delivering group work (NSPCC, 2017) and was circulated among staff in early 2017 and used as the basis for training in that same year. The second guide did not displace the first guide hence from the introduction of the second guide in 2017, the NSPCC had two pieces of guidance for NSPCC practitioners on how to carry out group work.

Aims and objectives of the group work

The Protect & Respect group work service was intended for ‘small gatherings’ of children and young people, between the ages of 11 and 19. The programme guidance was ambiguous on whether children and young people who were deemed to be at risk of exploitation in the short-term should be included in the group work. The principal message from the guidance was that children and young people were to be selected if they were considered vulnerable to sexual exploitation but where there were ‘no specific concerns of exploitation’ (NSPCC, 2014, pp13–18). In this context ‘concerns’ referred to children and young people being at risk of exploitation in the short-term or who were already being exploited. However, one of the examples given of children and young people for whom group work would be appropriate included those who were considered at risk, in particular

those ‘involved in a peer group where there [were] concerns about the *risks* posed to members of the group’ (NSPCC, 2014, p18). Children and young people for whom group work was felt to be appropriate were those:

- Having special educational needs.
- Having a disability.
- Being a young carer.
- Not being in education, training or employment.
- Being in residential care.
- Accessing alternative education or failing to engage with mainstream education.
- Being in a Pupil Referral Unit (NSPCC, 2014, pp18–19)

The aim of the group work stated in the guidance was to reduce the vulnerability of children and young people to sexual exploitation (NSPCC, 2014, p1). In effect this meant reducing the risk of children and young people being exploited in the medium to long-term (see discussion on language in the previous section). It was hypothesised that group work could do this by:

1. Improving understanding of sexual exploitation and grooming, which in turn would lead to children and young people being better able to make ‘safe decisions’, meaning they were less likely to experience exploitation (NSPCC, 2014, p1, p8).
2. Helping children and young people identify ways to build ‘resilience and resistance’ (NSPCC, 2014, p18).
3. Helping children and young people develop a ‘reflective mindset’ where they were encouraged to consider alternative viewpoints and values (NSPCC, 2017). It was felt that opening up a reflective mindset was a crucial means through which attitudinal and behavioural change could be brought about (NSPCC, 2017).

A review conducted one year into the delivery of the programme concluded that the programme was not in a position to deliver on the ambition of an impact study. This was because, in practice, the service delivery models were not consistently being delivered according to programme guidance. The review findings triggered a decision to amend the aim of the evaluation to studying and documenting:

- The work that was done, in practice, by NSPCC practitioners with children and young people, carers and professionals.
- The challenges faced in assessing, preventing and stopping exploitation and what was done to attempt to overcome those challenges.

The 2014 model guide

In May 2014, a semi-structured model of group work was detailed in the first service guide (NSPCC, 2014). NSPCC practitioners were instructed to deliver six weekly sessions with key topics to be covered in each session:

1. Week 1: Introduction to sexual exploitation and the legal concept of a child.
2. Week 2: Sexual exploitation, relationships, consent, domestic abuse and drugs and alcohol.
3. Week 3: Grooming.
4. Week 4: The Push and Pull Factors of Exploitation.
5. Week 5: Healthy Relationships
6. Week 6: Safe Decisions.

The guide provided a detailed summary of sub-topics to be covered and resources that could be used for each topic. Practitioners were free to adapt 'approach and resources'. The guide also instructed practitioners on the preparatory work that was needed prior to starting up group work:

- A prevention group referral form was to be completed by the agency requesting group work and a partnership agreement signed.
- The referring agency was expected to obtain the consent from the children and young people and their carers.
- An agreement was to be reached with the child protection lead from the referring agency over child protection procedures. The referring agency was to be expected to take the lead in responding to child protection concerns, using their organisational procedure.

Further expectations about the venue, staffing and attendance were laid out:

- The referring agency was expected to make a room available for all six sessions.
- A minimum of two NSPCC staff members were expected to deliver sessions, with the same personnel being present at all six sessions.
- Children and young people were expected to attend each session; but were not to be excluded from the group if late or absent.
- Children and young people who wanted to leave the session early were to be encouraged to stay but not stopped from leaving.

The 2017 model guide

While the 2017 guide continued to suggest six sessions for group work, it identified five core and three complementary topics. The five core topics were:

- Relationships & consent
- Sexual exploitation
- Grooming
- Social media & technology
- Push & Pull factors.

NSPCC practitioners were advised to use three complementary topics across several sessions, which were:

- Pornography
- Drugs & alcohol
- The impact of child sexual exploitation.

In the opinion of the authors of the 2017 guide, a further difference between the two guides was that the 2017 guide emphasised the importance of promoting a group discussion. This contrasted to the 2014 guide, which they felt was focused on information giving. The authors of the 2017 guide felt that the promotion of group discussion, where children and young people were given permission to voice, exchange and listen to each other's views and feelings, was crucial to bringing about a 'reflective mindset', which in turn was felt to be key to bringing about attitudinal and behavioural change.

At this point it is worth noting that 'group work' when applied in social work settings has a tradition, based on theory and evidence, which stretches back into the 1970s (see paper by Drumm [2006] for more detail). The essential factors of 'social group work' include:

- Inclusion and respect.
- Mutual aid.
- Stage management.
- Use of conflict.
- Conscious development, use, and implications of purpose.
- Breaking taboos.
- Value of activity.
- Problem-solving. (Drumm, 2006, pp20-2)

The following chapter on service implementation demonstrates that, in practice, some of these factors were present in the group work interactions. However it is noticeable that the guidances written in 2014 and 2017 did not mention these factors or discuss how these factors were to be implemented (see Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz [2014] for an example of a group work approach to discussing sexual exploitation which drew on the factors).

Evaluation Methodology in Brief

This report presents the key findings from the evaluation of the group work service. The findings in this summary cover the period between June 2014 and November 2017. The majority of data collected for this evaluation report comes from interviews with NSPCC practitioners, but also from interviews with children and young people and referring professionals. Some of the data used comes from case notes written by NSPCC practitioners, where children and young people consented to the notes being used in the evaluation. This report also draws on quantitative data collected on the characteristics and needs of the children and young people allocated to the service, length of service, and attrition and retention for the service and service evaluation. A more detailed description and discussion of the evaluation methodology is provided in Appendix C of the discussion report (Williams, 2019a, pp116-24).

A summary of the introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse (DFE, 2017). It is a process that involves the exchange of a resource for sexual activity with a child or young person.

In 2014, the NSPCC started an evaluation of its Protect & Respect programme of sexual exploitation services. The programme was provided from 15 service centres located in towns and cities in England and Wales.

The programme comprised five types of service delivered to children and young people aged 11 to 19. One of these services was a group work service. The group work service was to be delivered to children and young people who were considered to be vulnerable to exploitation but not at risk of being exploited in the short-term.

The evaluation of the programme sought to study programme implementation, the experience of delivering and receiving the services, the challenges to preventing and reducing risk and service and evaluation attrition.

Chapter 2: Service implementation

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings on how the group work service was implemented. The chapter starts by describing the number of children and young people referred to and receiving a group work service and participating in the evaluation. It then summarises NSPCC practitioners' accounts of the delivery of the Protect & Respect group work: it covers the preparedness of NSPCC practitioners for delivering the group work; how referrals were made; how groups of children and young people were formed; and how group work was delivered in practice. Children and young people's contribution to participation in the group work is detailed in the next chapter.

Service delivery in numbers

In the period covered by the evaluation, between June 2014 and November 2017, 11 NSPCC service centres delivered Protect & Respect group work services across England and Wales. Each service centre had:

- A service manager with overall responsibility for the service.
- One or more team managers with operational responsibility for the service.
- A team of NSPCC practitioners who delivered the service.

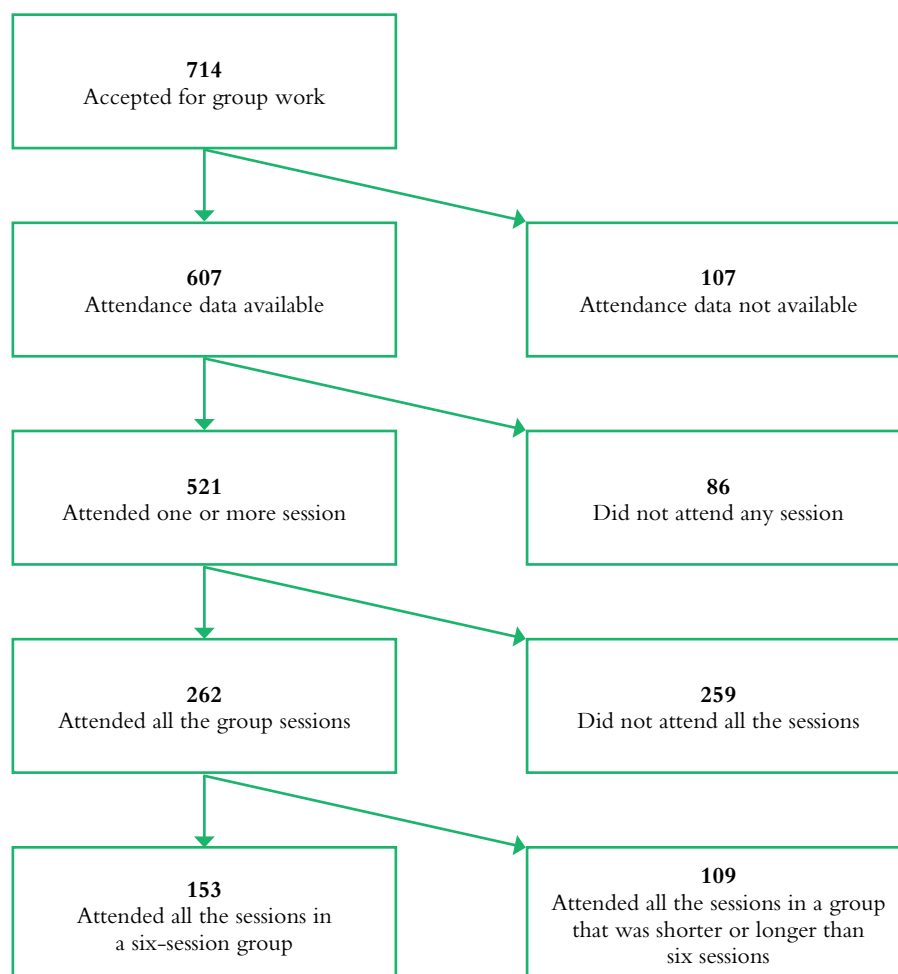
Although 11 service centres provided at least one group, centres did not provide an equal amount of group work. A total of 64 different NSPCC practitioners were recorded as having provided group work. One service centre provided group work to 40 per cent of all children and young people who accessed group work (n=203, see Table 2 in Appendix A). Four service centres, collectively, provided group work to over 75 per cent of all children and young people who accessed group work (n=404, see Table 2 in Appendix A).

NSPCC practitioners reported that most groups were held in schools. Children and young people were selected for group work by school staff, sometimes in consultation with NSPCC practitioners. The patterns of delivery, attendance and attrition are outlined in Diagram 1. During the period covered by the evaluation:

- 714 children and young people were accepted for group work.

- 521 children and young people, for whom accurate attendance data was available to the evaluation team, attended one or more session of group work³.
- 84 groups were delivered, with most of them being delivered in schools.
- One half of the groups ran for six sessions, with the other half running between two and five sessions or between seven and nine.
- An average of six children and young people attended each group, although in practice the number of children and young people allocated to a group or attending a group session varied between two and nine.
- One half of all children and young people attended all the sessions in their group (n=262).
- 30 per cent of all children and young people attended all the sessions in a six-session group (n=153).

Diagram 1: Service attrition in Protect & Respect group work



³ In 107 cases, attendance data was not available for children and young people who had been allocated to group work. In another 86 cases, it is known that while the child or young person was allocated to group work, they did not attend any sessions.

The children and young people who accessed Protect & Respect group work tended to be:

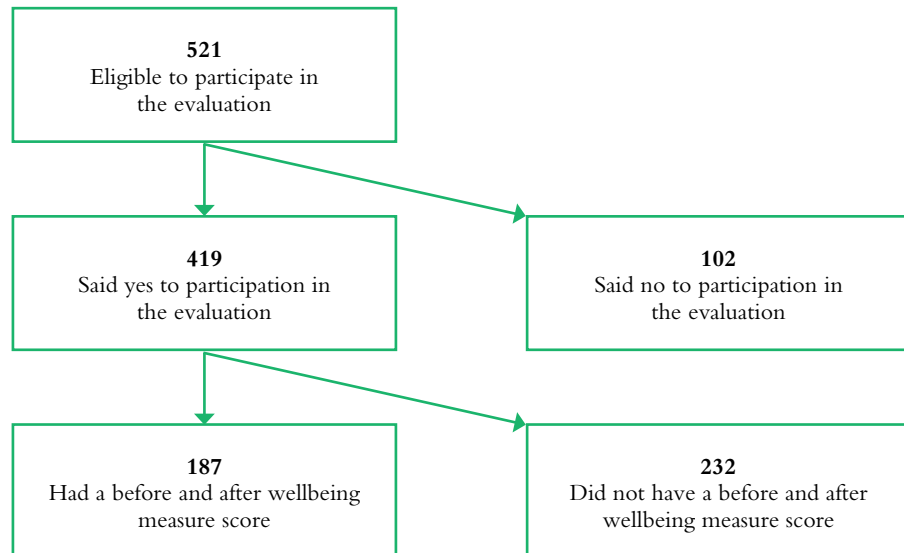
1. Female – in total, 80 per cent of the children and young people accessing group work, whose gender was known (n=505), were female (n=420).
2. Aged 16 or under – in total, 98 per cent of the children and young people accessing the group work, whose age was known (n=518) were 16 or under (n=507).
3. White British – in total, 63 per cent of the children and young people accessing the group work, whose ethnic background was known (n=487) were White British (n=304).

See Appendix B at the end of this report for a full demographic breakdown.

Evaluation attrition in numbers

There was a significant amount of evaluation attrition in the Protect & Respect group work service. Diagram 2 demonstrates how evaluation attrition could occur at various stages, from the point at which an NSPCC practitioner asked for consent, all the way through to the practitioner completing a measure for the child or young person.

Diagram 2: Evaluation attrition in Protect & Respect group work



Preparedness for delivering Protect & Respect group work

Prior experience

Delivering group work presented a new challenge for many NSPCC practitioners, with none of the practitioners or managers interviewed reporting having had prior experience of delivering group work on child sexual exploitation. Some had not worked on sexual exploitation before and some had not had experience of working with adolescents.

Training

The training provided by the NSPCC on group work was often wrapped up in training provided on the Protect & Respect programme as a whole. The training received by staff working on Protect & Respect varied. NSPCC practitioners reported receiving some combination of:

- Protect & Respect core training, based on the 2014 group work model guidance (NSPCC, 2014), provided by a senior manager responsible for the development of the programme.
- Protect & Respect core training, based on the 2017 group work guidance (NSPCC, 2017), provided by NSPCC practitioners with experience of delivering group work.
- Training received by NSPCC practitioners with experience of delivering group work from a neighbouring service centre.
- A five-day training course on developing therapeutic skills.
- Local courses and reading around the subject.

Some NSPCC practitioners who were starting out in the delivery of group work reported that they would have appreciated more support and advice from NSPCC practitioners who already had experience in delivering group work. Key learning for NSPCC practitioners came through the discussions they had with children and young people during the group work. NSPCC practitioners explained that their discussions with children and young people had taught them about the life of children and young people, the language used by children and young people, the functionality of social media applications and methods for applying privacy settings on social media applications.

Resources

The resources available for delivering group work varied across service centres. Teams in each centre maintained their own resource bank. While the NSPCC had established a shared drive for resources to be used by all service centres, not everyone was aware of the drive and NSPCC practitioners reported not using it. Teams collated activity sheets, arts and crafts materials and a range of videos. Videos covered dramatised examples of exploitation, harassment and abuse; documentaries of exploitation and grooming and educational films explaining concepts like consent. Some resources were created by NSPCC practitioners; some had been created by other charitable or governmental organisations.

NSPCC practitioners' perceptions about the availability of resources varied. For example, some struggled to find resources for working with boys while other practitioners felt that there were a large number of such resources. Other groups that practitioners could struggle to find resources to help in their work included lesbian, gay or transgender children and young people.

Some NSPCC practitioners also used tools to help them better understand the needs of children and young people during the delivery of group work. Tools used to do this included: the Outcome Rating Scale, which measures wellbeing; the Group Session Rating Scale, which measures satisfaction with the group work experience; and the Child Report of Post-Traumatic Symptoms, which measures traumatic symptomology.

Referrals

Encouraging referrals

NSPCC staff reported that most requests for group work came from schools, with a very small number coming from youth clubs. Types of schools requesting work included special needs, alternative curriculum and mainstream state. Not all schools informed about the service asked for it to be provided to their children. One NSPCC service centre manager reported that, in her area, organisational change to the local education authority meant that staff lacked the time and energy to work with the NSPCC to arrange group work. One NSPCC practitioner said that group work could not be delivered in some Welsh speaking schools because NSPCC's forms were written in English and not Welsh. In one school, the experience of being challenged by NSPCC workers to deal with a number of safeguarding issues, which had arisen from the group work, was felt to have led to a decision not to refer again:

“I have certainly heard people say ‘I’m not going to refer again’... I think they just think that [group work] causes too many issues. It’s complicated but that’s because they don’t want to be challenged. So it’s not good for a young person. It stops [the school] having issues with professionals as opposed to what’s good for the young person.”

Lead for child sexual exploitation in a local authority

While the guidance for the group work required that children and young people who were vulnerable to sexual exploitation but who were not at risk of exploitation should be referred and allocated, the guidance offered by NSPCC practitioners to school staff sometimes differed. In practice, NSPCC practitioners advised school staff to apply one or more of the following criteria when selecting children and young people for group work:

- Vulnerable to exploitation.
- Showing signs of exploitation.
- Engaged in risk-taking behaviour.
- At risk of exploitation.

In some cases, the NSPCC practitioner had advised the school staff to refer any children and young people that they felt needed group work, in effect allowing school staff to set the criteria for the type of child or young person that should access group work. Part of the explanation for why NSPCC practitioners’ guidance differed to that of the model guide was that practitioners had a different understanding of the terms ‘vulnerability’ and ‘risk’. For example, while the model guide drew a distinction between being vulnerable and at risk, some NSPCC practitioners used the terms interchangeably. Some children and young people were described in their case notes as being both vulnerable and at risk. Some NSPCC practitioners acknowledged that they did not draw a distinction between the two terms:

“If you asked me to describe what the difference was I wouldn’t be able to give you a clear answer.”

NSPCC practitioner (had been working on P&R group work for three years at the time of the interview)

Furthermore, NSPCC practitioners did not see vulnerability as a criterion that could be used to distinguish children and young people who needed group work from those who did not. Some felt that all children and young people were vulnerable because of adolescence or because of the sexualised culture and the targeting opportunities that social media applications offered potential perpetrators. Hence

all children and young people were potentially beneficiaries of this group work.

The source and motivation of referrals

Referrals from schools were motivated by a combination of:

- Professional concerns regarding the behaviour or circumstances of children and young people.
- Expectations of what school staff felt the group work could achieve for the children and young people they referred.
- A failure to secure support from the local authority or other local agencies.

Referring vulnerable children and young people

Some children and young people were referred because they were seen as vulnerable to, but not at risk of, exploitation, as per the group work guidance. Sometimes, the vulnerability was broader than for others. For example, in one school where children and young people were selected for the programme it was because they were young and had just started walking home from school. In another case, reported by an NSPCC practitioner, a young person was selected because they had started to engage in conversations with people online and seemed to have no awareness of the risks. School staff hoped that the group work would enable children and young people to identify risks, make decisions that increased their safety and seek help:

“I do think it’s about them being equipped with knowledge and skills that might keep them safe at some point in the future. I think it’s about trying to give them knowledge of what they would do in certain scenarios and how they can spot those scenarios.”

Safeguarding officer for a school

Referring children and young people where there were concerns about risk and actual exploitation

The referral requirement laid out in the model guidance was based on the assumption that certainty could be reached about vulnerability and risk, and on whether the child or young person was being exploited. In practice, however, certainty could not be reached on these issues at the point of referral. In some cases, school staff were concerned that children and young people might be involved in relationships and situations that might pose a risk of exploitation or that might

involve exploitation. NSPCC practitioners explained that, in some of these cases, school staff had made unsuccessful attempts to get local authority child protection services involved to investigate further. School staff had been told that the involvement of child protection services was conditional on evidence of risk or exploitation. NSPCC practitioners explained that, in these cases, school staff referred the children and young people for group work hoping, in part, that NSPCC practitioners would be able to open up discussions and clarify the situation with the children and young people. In this way, group work and the idea of prevention became seen and used as a container for uncertainty and/or for child protection issues that teachers felt the child protection system was not prepared to address.

Referring boys who posed a risk of exploitation

NSPCC practitioners explained that, in some cases, school staff referred young boys because they were felt to pose a risk of exploitation to girls. They were not mixed with children and young people who were felt to have been vulnerable to exploitation. Some school staff were said by NSPCC practitioners to have concerns that boys were being groomed by other boys, as gang members and to help with the exploitation of girls. In such cases, children and young people were referred with the expectation that NSPCC practitioners could do some work with the boys on their attitudes and behaviours towards girls and women, and on the impact of exploitation on the lives of girls and young women:

“They want us to give [the boys] a talking to, for want of a better word, on their attitudes towards females.”

NSPCC practitioner

Referring children and young people for concerns separate to sexual exploitation

In some cases, school staff were said by NSPCC staff to have referred children and young people to the group work for concerns that were not focused on exploitation. Experiences of bullying, neglect, social isolation among their peers, and having carers with mental health problems were issues that it was felt the group work could help children and young people reflect on and manage. Children and young people were also referred when there were concerns they were sexually active, were sending and receiving naked images or watching pornography:

“I think it was just [the school staff] wanted a more in-depth understanding for [the children and young people] about the risks and about their own responsibility as well, in terms of not requesting images or not putting pressure on other people to send them images as well.”

NSPCC practitioner

In some cases, girls were selected so NSPCC practitioners could support them to manage and challenge poor attitudes expressed by boys towards them in their school.

Selecting and allocating children and young people

Working together

School staff initiated the selection of children and young people for their groups on the advice of NSPCC practitioners. The further involvement of NSPCC staff in the selection process for groups varied – in some cases, school staff decided:

“You have to go with what the school thinks; they’re the ones that know the children and young people.”

NSPCC practitioner

However, in other areas, NSPCC practitioners invested a significant amount of time (as much as two working days) in working together with school staff to review their selection:

“I think we need someone to really interrogate the schools on who they’re picking, having a devoted practitioner to the task could help. It seems like quite a lot of work needs to be done to ensure that they select the right children and young people. Its easily a couple of meetings at the school, particularly when they want to tip it to the higher risk end, it can take more than a day’s work just to make sure we have the right people in the group, and that higher risks are referred to one to one work, and that involves some unpicking.”

NSPCC practitioner

Reviewing the selection included verifying the level of need and vulnerability and exploring existing relationships between those selected. Safeguarding concerns could come to light during this review process, which resulted in information being passed to Children's Services and the police. During the review, claims, which had been made about the circumstances, vulnerabilities and risks to the children and young people, were not always defensible when scrutinised. Children and young people could be deselected from the group when it became clear that:

- Exploitation was occurring.
- The child or young person was at risk from another type of harm that took precedence in their life or would make engagement difficult.
- It appeared that children and young people selected for group work were in conflict with one another.

In some cases, NSPCC staff felt unable to get involved in the selection of children and young people even when they had wanted to. This happened when school staff made 'last minute' decisions about group membership, which left the NSPCC with no time to review.

Decisions about selections

NSPCC staff demonstrated a willingness to accept those children and young people into group work whose needs lay outside of the strict referral criteria provided by the model guidance. Children and young people who were accepted into group work included those who were felt to be at risk of exploitation, those who were being exploited through the sending and receiving of naked images, and boys who were felt to pose a risk of exploitation to girls. One NSPCC practitioner explained how children and young people who were being exploited through the use of naked images were accepted for group work, in part because of the perception of school staff and NSPCC practitioners that the numbers of children and young people being subject to this form of exploitation was too large for local authority child protection teams to deal with:

"The problem is, and the frustration for us, is that this is happening across year groups, like it's so many children and young people, but how do you then address that? Like if we're going to go and start sending a referral out to the police and all of that stuff about these children and young people, then actually 200 children and young people need that in that school."

NSPCC practitioner

Furthermore, NSPCC practitioners demonstrated a willingness to accept children and young people for group work where there was uncertainty about their vulnerability, risk or experience of exploitation. The lack of certainty over whether children and young people were vulnerable or at risk could be seen in the use of the word ‘potentially’ in this case note:

“[Group members] have been identified as potentially having a raised vulnerability to exploitation.”

NSPCC practitioner’s case note

NSPCC practitioners said that several other factors could motivate the selection of children and young people:

- Wanting to make up the numbers, so a group could be provided to those children and young people who were felt to need group work.
- Wanting a break from managing the disruptive behaviour of particular children and young people.

Sometimes, group composition was limited by age, gender or ethnicity. When mixed gender groups were avoided, it was based on the belief and/or experience that boys could inhibit the participation of girls and of the tendency of boys and girls to argue with each other. When group membership was limited to children and young people who had learning needs or who had been excluded from school, it was because the educational institution from which the children and young people were drawn worked exclusively with that type of child or young person. Boys were less likely to be referred and allocated to the service than girls. NSPCC practitioners and other professionals felt that boys, compared with girls, were effective in hiding their vulnerability, partly because they were more likely than girls to face adverse consequences if they revealed vulnerability:

“Boys to me, in my personal opinion, they just seem to get on with it. They’re not quite as out there as what the girls were with saying how they’d been affected and saying, ‘He said this to me’, or, ‘He did this on the weekend’. They boys just didn’t seem to voice their concerns really.”

Referring professional

School staff seeking informed consent

The model guidance required school staff to gain the informed consent of children and young people and their carers when the young person was below the age of 16. However, the children and young people attending group work were not always given the choice to attend. In some cases, children and young people reported that school staff had explained to them that they were to attend the group work, without a choice being offered. NSPCC practitioners and children and young people reported that school staff had not always informed children and young people about what the group was about and the reason for why they had been selected for the group. Where this happened NSPCC practitioners made it clear to the children and young people that they had the freedom to say no to participating in group work. In some centres staff added an introductory session to the group work to inform children and young people about what the work would entail.

NSPCC practitioners also reported that when carers were asked for their consent, an inability to read and understand English, combined with the fact that consent forms were sent out in English, stopped some carers from consenting. In some cases, parents and carers were shocked when they read about the group, because they had thought that it meant their children were being groomed or exploited. When a carer did not provide consent, the child or young person would be withdrawn from the group selection.

NSPCC staff introducing themselves to the children and young people

The way in which NSPCC practitioners introduced themselves to the children and young people varied. Some used the first of the six group work sessions. Other practitioners, after finding that it was not possible to do a proper introduction and cover the content in the first session, designed groups with an additional introductory session. In one service centre area, NSPCC practitioners started to use short one-to-one sessions with children and young people to introduce themselves.

Introductory work was used in part to ensure that the child or young person felt free to say no to the work, having been fully informed about it. Children and young people would be informed through the following:

- An explanation of the purpose of the group and the reasons for why the children and young people had been selected for it.

- In one service centre, staff had started to provide a ‘warm up’ session, during which time there would be a discussion of the issues, so that the children and young people could understand what the group work experience would feel like.

Another aim of the introductory work was to help the NSPCC practitioner find out more about the child or young person’s background and, in particular:

- Their support network.
- The state of their relationships with other group members.

Introductory work was also used to notify children and young people of their rights and responsibilities and, in particular:

- Their responsibility to keep personal information divulged during the group work confidential.
- NSPCC practitioners’ duty to share information about safeguarding concerns if raised in the group.
- Their right to leave the group if they wanted to.

Finally, introductory sessions were used to notify the children and young people that issues discussed in the group could trigger traumatic symptoms and that, if they felt distressed, they could seek help outside of the group.

Describing group work to children and young people

NSPCC practitioners explained that when children and young people were informed about the purpose of the group work, descriptions of the purpose and content varied. Sometimes, the group was described as being about exploitation, sometimes about ‘healthy relationships’ and ‘keeping safe’. In one service centre where the group was run with boys, NSPCC practitioners described part of the purpose of the group as being for the NSPCC practitioners to hear about what it was like being a boy in the school and local area. In some groups, use of the term ‘sexual exploitation’ was avoided if it was felt that this might reduce engagement:

“We wouldn’t mention CSE, because a lot of them don’t know what it means and it’s quite a scary word and scary phrase, I think, to use when you first meet a young person, so we wouldn’t use it until we’re in a group where we can talk about properly. Mostly, I usually say a group about keeping ourselves safe in lots of different situations, so I would say we look at healthy relationships and what might be good and bad in a relationship,

how we can keep ourselves happy in a relationship. The different dangers online and offline and how we can keep ourselves safe from that really, and that's the most general thing I would say at the beginning. And I guess then I would use information that we got from the referral, so if there's any specific kind of topics that the school have said that the children and young people particularly need support around or anything like that, and then I might say, give that as an example as well, something that we might cover."

NSPCC practitioner

NSPCC practitioners sometimes avoided informing children and young people about the particular reasons for why they had been selected for group work. In those situations, children and young people were not informed about the reason for their selection for fear that this would offend them and reduce their engagement. One NSPCC practitioner felt that boys, who had been selected because of concerns they were involved in exploiting children and young people, would have been 'defensive' if they had been told the reason. Another practitioner explained that she had avoided telling girls they had been selected for concerns they were involved in situations that made them vulnerable, because she did not want them to feel 'judged':

"No because I wouldn't want them to think that we're judging them or thought any bad of them. Because it's the situation that they're in, isn't it, that has evolved or developed through maybe no fault of their own.

NSPCC practitioner

Preparing and planning the group work

Staffing

Although the 2014 model guide for group work required group work sessions be taken by two NSPCC practitioners, in practice the combination of staff delivering group work varied. NSPCC practitioners, school staff, social workers, guest speakers from outside agencies and interpreters all played a role in delivering group work. NSPCC practitioners delivering group work included social work students. At one service centre, an NSPCC manager would sometimes sit in to observe sessions. While the 2014 model guide had recommended that the same two NSPCC practitioners deliver a group, in practice the staff delivering the group could change, with one service centre operating a rota system where two from any three named practitioners could deliver it.

School staff could play a role in the provision of group work by being present in the session or being on standby to deal with issues coming out of the group. School staff played a role in:

- Managing and dealing with disruptive behaviour.
- Discussing, referring and managing safeguarding concerns.
- Helping monitor and plan subsequent group work sessions.
- Supporting a child or young person within the group work when they had additional needs.

Interpreting could be done by paid interpreters, but also by children and young people in the group. Paid interpreting services were sometimes unsatisfactory: agencies sent different interpreters across the course of the group when one single interpreter had been requested; male interpreters were sent when a female one had been requested; and interpreters were not always comfortable talking about exploitation.

Rooms

Although the 2014 guidance had laid down an expectation that the referring agency would make a room available for all six sessions, schools were not always able to guarantee that group work could be provided from the same room. NSPCC practitioners reported that the suitability of the room varied, with some being too small. Rooms could be switched at the last minute. Children and young people helped practitioners set up rooms, work the technology and prepare hot drinks.

Aims and approaches

In practice, the aims and approaches to working with children and young people varied across the groups (see Appendix C, pp116–24, for more detail). NSPCC practitioners used group work to improve different combinations of the following outcomes:

- Understanding the sexual organs and how heterosexual and homosexual intercourse occurs.
- Understanding consent, the consequences of sending naked images and healthy relationships.
- Sensitivity to one's own vulnerability to getting involved in unhealthy relationships, being groomed and exploited.
- Ability to analyse and recognise a dangerous situation.
- Ability to recognise feelings of fear.
- Ability to act and get support when in danger.

- Knowledge about and ability to take actions to avoid unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.
- Knowledge about and ability to ensure one is unidentifiable and unavailable to strangers on social media applications.
- Expectations about sexual relationships and bodies, in contrast to the expectations that children and young people may have developed having watched pornography.
- The ability to respect people's right to say no to sexual relationships and sexual interaction.

In some groups, NSPCC practitioners aimed to discuss and challenge young boys' attitudes towards girls, and their expectation that girls should provide them with sexual favours and gratification when it suited the boys. Group work was also used to promote the viewpoint among children and young people that sending naked images was unacceptable. It was also pointed out by one NSPCC practitioner that doing group work helped practitioners do 'a little more digging around' with children and young people for whom school staff had concerns that they might be involved with people or in situations that heightened the risk of them being exploited.

Reflective mindset and group discussion

One NSPCC practitioner explained that in the service centre that she worked in, where practitioners were focused on bringing about attitudinal and behaviour change in children and young people, such changes were felt to depend on the children and young people developing a 'reflective mindset'. Having a reflective mindset meant that the child or young person was open to considering different perspectives, values and understandings, even if they did not necessarily accept or adopt them. Fostering a reflective mindset was said to require that NSPCC practitioners provided:

- Opportunities for discussion. Thus, in some groups, NSPCC practitioners aimed to open up a space for views, conversation and dialogue.
- A space where children and young people could feel free to ask questions about topics and offer views and perspectives, even if what they suggested went against what the NSPCC practitioners were saying. This meant that when children and young people expressed disrespectful attitudes or talked about involvement in situations that heightened their risk of abuse or exploitation or reported having engaged in anti-social or abusive behaviour, NSPCC practitioners avoided confrontation or condemnation. Instead, practitioners questioned them about their motivations. They encouraged empathy in children and young people. For example, when boys said that they expected their girlfriends

to have sex with them whenever they wanted, the NSPCC practitioner would ask them to reflect on what that might feel like for their girlfriend. In some cases, NSPCC practitioners offered an alternative view to ‘gently challenge the status quo’, a typical group work technique (see Drumm, 2006, p22).

- The creation of a relaxed informal atmosphere. This was said to have been achieved by allowing children and young people to address NSPCC practitioners by their first name, the consumption of snacks and permitting children and young people to sit on the floor or stand (rather than sitting on a chair):

“[The girls] know that we don’t think that [sending naked images] is a good thing to do, but I think if we had just gone in and said, ‘You shouldn’t do this. It’s illegal, stop doing it,’ it wouldn’t have made a difference. And they know that, and we did exercises around it being illegal and stuff like that, but it was more exploring with them, ‘Why are you doing this?’ and I think it was for them to have that and then saying, ‘Well, actually, I don’t really know what we’re getting from it.’ And then we’re asking them, ‘Does this make you more popular or does this make guys like you more? Or do they respect you more doing it?’ and they say, ‘Well, no, they don’t.’”

NSPCC practitioner

- Permission to use informal language to describe sexual issues and sexual acts:

“They won’t use the word masturbating when talking about porn, but they will use the word wank, which is fine by us but you can see them sort of testing that out a bit, ‘Is it OK to say this in school? Will they get into trouble?’, sort of thing. But if you want to have conversations about pornography and why people use pornography, that impacts on how they perceive relationships and sex and what they can get drawn into through pornography, I think you need to be able to be candid in terms of the language and not get caught up in, not losing sight of the issue really and the issue is to have an exploration of the issue rather than you’re swearing in school, which is I’m sure what some teachers would see it as.”

NSPCC practitioner

Helping children and young people develop a reflective mindset was sometimes intended to be a means to the end of attitudinal and behavioural change. However, it was also intended to be an end in itself when NSPCC practitioners saw their role, in part, to be opening up a space and opportunity for children and young people to talk to adults about their thoughts, feelings and experience of sexuality, sexual feelings and sexual relationships. In this way the work attempted to create a space in which children and young people could talk about things that were usually considered taboo, another typical element of social group work (Drumm, 2006).

An important difference in the way group work was provided across service centres was the balance between opening up a discussion and providing information to children and young people. Where promoting group discussion was important, NSPCC practitioners would adapt and change the content and style of delivery of the group work when there was little engagement from the group. Having a 'Plan B' or 'a list of ten things' were felt to be useful ways of enhancing the practitioner's ability to respond to group members' needs and preferences. When the aim was to ensure a group discussion around an issue, NSPCC practitioners were content not to cover all the topics in the model guide. In fact, one NSPCC practitioner felt covering all the topics was a sign that they had failed to foster a 'reflective mindset'. Other NSPCC practitioners, however, gave priority to providing information and covering the topics in the guide. For some, this meant they did not have as much time as they would have liked to have a discussion. In some cases, the NSPCC practitioner could find that, while they tried to open up a discussion among children and young people, school staff would try to close those discussions down, preferring the children and young people to focus on what the NSPCC practitioner had to say to them. NSPCC practitioners said that where this happened it was because school staff had wanted to maintain the expectations held of children and young people in normal lesson time.

Children and young people-led group work

A child-led approach was developed in one area, which started by encouraging children and young people to explain to NSPCC practitioners what life was like for them where they lived. Subsequent group work sessions were then based on the things that children and young people talked about with the NSPCC practitioners and on their preferences:

"The angle we came in at it from was 'we run these services, we're a different generation from you, you tell me what it's like, you educate me.'"

NSPCC practitioner

This approach was taken with a group of boys, and was chosen partly because it was felt that the NSPCC practitioners, being women, needed to find a way of working with the boys that helped them overcome the scepticism that women would have little that was relevant or useful to offer them:

“What do you know?”

Question posed by group of boys to female NSPCC practitioners

Topics covered

In practice, NSPCC practitioners covered a variety of topics, some of which were in the programme guides, including:

- The mechanics of sexual intercourse.
- Sex education concepts.
- Sexual health.
- Healthy relationships.
- Sexual exploitation.
- Grooming.
- Pornography and relationships.
- Consent.
- The law as it relates to sex, exploitation and assault.
- Wellbeing and self-esteem.
- How the media creates images of beauty for children and young people to aspire to.
- Being able to recognise fear and anxiety.
- Who to contact if the child or young person does not feel safe.

In some groups, NSPCC practitioners found that children and young people’s understanding of sexual matters needed to be improved before practitioners could start talking to children and young people about things like child sexual exploitation:

“The classes evolved into sexual relationships and sex education. I know that’s not necessarily the remit, it’s not what it was set out to do, but that’s what happens when we deliver groups. . . Finding out that the group members’ understanding of what sex is, and offering a basic definition prior to the group, we find that the learning is not there at all.”

NSPCC practitioner

Guide topics were sometimes omitted or less time was spent on them if they were felt not to be relevant to the children and young people. For example, when children and young people said that it would be unlikely that they would be exploited by a stranger with alcohol, a video depicting approaches made by strangers with alcohol was skipped. Topics that were not included in the guide were used when felt to be relevant. Examples of this included:

- Girls saying that constant harassment by boys made them feel bad about themselves, which prompted staff to deliver a session on self-esteem and views on women.
- One group was focused on pornography after school staff had said the boys selected were watching a lot of pornography.
- School reports on group members sending naked images led to two sessions being devoted to online safety.

The number of topics covered and the detail into which topics were discussed and explored varied. Variation was affected in part by the perceived relevance of the topic to children and young people's lives, but also by their capacity to understand the topics. Where children and young people had learning needs or reduced cognitive capacity, NSPCC practitioners reported spending more time repeating and recapping 'simpler' messages.

Activities

NSPCC practitioners attempted a variety of activities during the group work. These included:

- Presentations and talks.
- Films, including documentaries, dramas and educational videos.
- Quizzes and activity sheets, to test and support children and young people's knowledge on the law and understanding of healthy relationships.
- A letterbox into which children and young people could drop questions, which were addressed in later sessions.
- Skills-based sessions including:
 - How to recognise and respond to fear. This involved drawing an outline of the child or young person's body on a scroll of paper and then mapping out sensations related to fear and anxiety on to the outline of the body.
 - How to put a condom on a penis.
 - Supporting children and young people to create a plan of who they could contact to seek support if they felt unsafe.

- The use of ‘beer goggles’, a device which children and young people wear over the eyes that produces a feeling of disorientation, to help children and young people understand what it feels like to be under the influence of alcohol.
- Discussions during which time children and young people were given the opportunity to express their views and reflect on their experiences. Sometimes, this could include NSPCC practitioners sharing personal experiences.
- One-to-one support around wellbeing. In some groups, children and young people were asked to complete the Outcome Rating Scale, a measure of wellbeing, in each session. Where the child or young person’s score fell below a threshold set by the practitioner, the practitioner held a private conversation with them and their teacher.
- Monitoring satisfaction. In one service centre, NSPCC practitioners administered the Group Work Session Rating Scale, a measure of children and young people’s satisfaction with group work, in each session. They used the results to plan future sessions.

Not all of the activities listed above were felt to be appropriate for group work. For example, there was a view that it was not the purpose of group work to have discussions about how concepts like grooming and exploitation applied to children and young people personally. Similarly, practitioners could feel that discussing wellbeing scores with children and young people was not part of their role.

Besides conducting a range of activities with children and young people, NSPCC practitioners would sometimes respond to needs that they identified during the group work. This included:

- Recommending that the school arrange a needs assessment for the child or young person where learning needs were identified.
- Working with school staff to refer a child or young person to the local authority, police or other services where it had become clear that abuse was taking place or had taken place in the past.

NSPCC practitioners could also do a range of work with school staff and carers. This included:

- Holding group sessions with staff and carers to raise awareness on exploitation and safeguarding.
- Helping school staff develop ways of talking to children and young people about issues and concerns, and to be proactive in identifying and responding to concerns.
- Supporting school staff to report safeguarding concerns within the school.

- Home visits made to carers at the end of the group work to raise awareness and discuss concerns.

Frequency, number and duration of sessions

The 2014 model guidance indicated that group work should be provided over six weekly sessions. However, in practice the number of sessions, together with the frequency and duration of sessions, varied. Group work formats included:

- Two sessions per week delivered across three weeks.
- Eight 45-minute sessions delivered across two months.
- Seven session groups:
 - With an introductory and consent session being added at the beginning.
 - Including extra sessions added to cover model issues or extra issues.
 - Including extra sessions to go over topics that NSPCC practitioners felt children and young people had not understood when presented in earlier sessions.

Time available for individual sessions was affected by school lesson times and because group work sessions needed to be of an identical length to school lesson times. It was also affected by the time that was sometimes needed to overcome technical problems and manage late arrivals to the group session.

Managing disruptive behaviour

Children and young people could sometimes exhibit what NSPCC practitioners referred to as ‘disruptive behaviour’. When this happened, NSPCC practitioners reminded group participants of agreements around behaviour, including the need to listen, to respect each other’s right to talk and to switch their phones off. In some groups, NSPCC practitioners invited members of staff from the school to sit in the classroom where the group was held, so they could help manage disruptive behaviour. In other groups, a member of school staff was on standby elsewhere in the school building. Sometimes, staff would take the view that the behaviour of a child or young person was such that they needed to be removed from the classroom. A consequence of being excluded from school was that a child or young person would no longer be able to attend the group in school time.

Exclusion policy

Although the 2014 model guidance had required that children and young people not be excluded from the group if late or absent, in one service centre NSPCC practitioners had taken the decision to exclude children and young people if they did not attend the first two sessions focused on ‘consent’ and ‘grooming’. This was because a good understanding of consent and grooming was felt to be a requirement for being able to engage in the material of future sessions. Furthermore, it was felt that the introduction of new group members could negatively affect the group dynamic that had been established. However, for other groups arranged for children and young people in a special needs school, non-attendance did not lead to exclusion. Instead, a recap of the core issues around consent and grooming was provided for all attendees at the beginning of each session.

Development and learning

NSPCC practitioners described how they had learned to deliver group work as part of a process of trial and error. Over time, the following areas of group work were developed:

- Working with school staff to ensure the right mix of children and young people in the group. The perceived benefit from being involved in the selection of children and young people for each group was informed by the following experiences:
 - In mixed gender groups, arguments had broken out between boys and girls, and girls had felt that boys had impeded their participation.
 - Groups with too many children and young people who exhibited ‘disruptive behaviour’ were difficult to manage.
 - Groups containing children and young people who had a history of conflict were difficult to manage.
 - In some groups, children and young people who had been admitted onto group work had needs that were considered to be too high.
- Additional introductory work with children and young people, which included an extra group session at the beginning of the work or a short one-to-one session with each child or young person selected for the group work. This was felt needed to ensure that the children and young people were informed and able to say no to participation prior to starting group work, to assess whether there was a history of conflict between proposed group members and to better understand the children and young people’s history.

- Approach, style and resources used in the group work. NSPCC practitioners described testing out different resources and honing an approach and style over time.
- Preparing school staff for their safeguarding responsibilities. NSPCC practitioners found that school staff did not always refer safeguarding concerns to the local authority when they had agreed to. This led NSPCC practitioners to recognise the importance of preparing school staff for their safeguarding role. School staff would be asked to commit to taking the lead on referrals, using the school policy, and to sign an agreement confirming the arrangement.
- Developing the capacity to provide one-to-one support for group work participants, which practitioners could discover through the group work. This learning had an impact on the way one service centre organised staff workload – the centre worked to ensure that staff had spare capacity to provide one-to-one support when they were due to run a group, so that children and young people who were identified as needing that support could get it.
- Understanding the terminology used by children and young people to describe sexual acts and behaviours. In some cases, NSPCC practitioners found they had to ‘Google’ terms used by children and young people to find out what they were referring to.
- Understanding the physical functioning of the body. Where practitioners struggled to answer children and young people’s questions about how the body worked, they needed to research the answers.

Practitioner impact

Practitioners’ wellbeing was adversely affected by hearing about young girls’ sense of powerlessness and their experience of abuse, humiliation and bullying, which is documented in the next chapter:

“It boggled our minds at the beginning.”

NSPCC practitioner

NSPCC practitioners came away feeling quite sad for the girls and worried about the extent to which all young girls were having this experience. Some tried to reassure themselves that this was probably just the experience of some children and young people. A more detailed on the support and supervision received by staff to manage the impact of work on the Protect & Respect programme is provided in the report on the one-to-one work (Williams, 2019b).

Key findings on service implementation

NSPCC workers who provided the service had a variety of relevant professional experiences but many had not delivered group work on child sexual exploitation.

In total 84 groups were delivered, with most of them taking place in schools.

521 children and young people, for whom accurate attendance data was available, were on record as having accessed a group work service.

On average six children and young people attended each group.

Approximately one half of all children and young people attended all the sessions in their group.

Children and young people tended to be selected for group work by school professionals. Some NSPCC practitioners invested up to two days time in working with school staff on selection.

In practice it was difficult to select children and young people who were vulnerable to but not at risk of sexual exploitation. School staff and NSPCC practitioners did not have enough information about the children and young people to make an accurate judgment. Some NSPCC practitioners, in practice, did not draw the distinction made by the programme guidance between vulnerability and risk.

Some children and young people were not informed about the purpose of the group work and not given the choice to say no to the group work when selected. Where this happened NSPCC practitioners made it clear to the children and young people that they had the freedom to say no to participating in group work. In some Centres staff added an introductory session to the group work to inform children and young people about what the work would entail.

Approaches taken by NSPCC practitioners to group work could vary and included: providing information to children and young people; promoting reflective group discussion on the topics; and encouraging children and young people to identify the topics that the group work would focus on.

Chapter 3: Children and young people's participation in and experience of group work

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise and describe the participation by children and young people during the group work and their experience of it. The first part of this chapter seeks to describe the life experiences of the children and young people, up to the point that they accessed the group work. The chapter then moves on to describe children and young people's experience of the group work, starting with their experiences of being informed about the group work and the extent to which they were given the freedom to say no to participation. It then moves on to explore children and young people's experience of the work in the group and in particular the way that they participated in the group work. Although this chapter is focused on children and young people's experience of group work, most of the information provided about their experience comes from the NSPCC practitioners, who worked with the children and young people, and who participated in the evaluation.

Children and young people's experiences prior to and during group work

This section provides a summary of the lives of the children and young people who accessed group work, with a special focus on the ways in which they experienced risk of exploitation. A more detailed description is provided in Appendix D.

Experiences of vulnerability, risk and exploitation

The model guidance required that children and young people be referred when they were vulnerable to exploitation (NSPCC, 2014). Children and young people who were deemed to be at risk of exploitation or who were being exploited were *not* to be allocated to the group work service. In practice, however, children and young people experiencing exploitation or at risk of exploitation were referred and allocated to the service.

NSPCC practitioners and children and young people interviewed as part of the evaluation described how young girls could be subject to sexual exploitation, sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual humiliation by groups of boys. Girls were assigned labels designed to humiliate, induce guilt and make them feel bad about themselves.

Boys also cemented their status by attempting to control the whereabouts and possessions of the girls they had relationships with. Alongside ongoing attempts to humiliate and control girls, boys used a variety of techniques to perform sexual acts on, receive sexual acts from, sexually assault and get sexualised or naked images from girls. Techniques used were exploitative but also involved the use of force. Girls complained about being humiliated, harassed, assaulted or exploited. They explained how being treated in this way left them feeling saddened, depressed and ashamed. Some reported resisting attempts to get sexual favours or images. However, while girls did not enjoy being subject to the range of abuses described and they could resist to varying extents, some resigned themselves to relationships that were abusive, to sending images and to submitting to attempts at sexual assault.

In one case, an NSPCC practitioner mentioned working with boys who had talked about being harassed by girls for sex and by girls who talked about harassing boys for their sexual attractiveness, by labelling them with terms like 'fit'.

Children and young people's labelling of their abusive experiences

NSPCC practitioners reported that children and young people tended not to use the term 'child sexual exploitation' in their everyday lives. None of the children and young people interviewed felt they were more vulnerable to exploitation than others, although some felt children and young people were vulnerable as a group. NSPCC practitioners could feel that some children and young people could not acknowledge their vulnerability because they needed to remain in denial about the dangers they faced. NSPCC practitioners felt that children and young people remained in denial to protect themselves from the level of fear that they would experience if they were to acknowledge the dangers posed to them. NSPCC practitioners and other professionals said that boys were unaware of their own vulnerability because they were unaware of the possibility that males could be sexually exploited or sexually abused. Some children and young people thought that sexual exploitation was something that could not happen to them.

Family life

Stressful family lives were a lived experience for some of the children and young people. This experience could represent a continuation of a long-term history of conflict, neglect and violence in the home. Some children and young people had experienced separation of birth parents and antagonistic relationships between both separated carers and their relatives.

Mobile phone technology and social media applications

Mobile phone technology and social media applications played a role in peer group relationships and were used in the humiliation, harassment, bullying, exploitation and assaults outlined earlier. NSPCC practitioners reported that, in their experience, many children and young people were “addicted” to using their mobile phones. In the opinion of one NSPCC practitioner, social media was creating an environment in which children and young people were becoming increasingly desirous of receiving constant validation. In this way, the practitioner felt that children and young people were turning to social media if they were having a bad day, and that in this state, they were more vulnerable to being groomed and exploited. It was also felt by NSPCC practitioners and children and young people that social media applications were encouraging impulsive and sometimes aggressive behaviours. Social media applications had helped create an environment in which children and young people were more likely to send a naked image, and in so doing created a good environment for people who want to obtain a naked image.

Sending naked images and sexualised presentation online

Some children and young people accessing group work were part of a wider group of children and young people in the school who created, sent and received naked images. In some school groups, NSPCC practitioners and other professionals explained that children and young people experienced requests for and the sending of naked images as normal, as part of life as a child at school. NSPCC practitioners said that some children and young people did not consider the possible adverse consequences of sending an image. The sending of naked images was felt by some NSPCC practitioners to be part of a wider project that children and young people were engaged in, to present themselves in a sexualised way, which could manifest in them using sexualised photographs for their profile picture on social media accounts. It was felt that the sexualised presentation of children and young people online was itself influenced by a wider cultural shift in the way that adults and celebrities, in particular, were presenting themselves in a sexualised way.

Alcohol and drugs

Some children and young people reported consumption of alcohol and drugs, including very heavy consumption of alcohol, such as two bottles of vodka in one sitting. One young person described how, in social situations and parties, boys waited until girls got drunk or provided drinks and drugs to facilitate girls reaching a point of intoxication, because it lowered the girls’ resistance to attempts at sexual assault and harassment. Children and young people also

described how, at parties and social gatherings, incidents of public shaming, humiliation and sexual assault were experienced during and after periods of intoxication.

Unsupervised spaces

Children and young people described situations and circumstances in which they spent time with other children and young people away from their carers and without a supervising adult. Another area in which children and young people interacted unsupervised with peers or with adults, who were seeking to obtain naked images and engage in sexual interaction with them, was on social media applications. One NSPCC practitioner explained how children and young people described how they flirted with people online, something which children and young people referred to as 'linking with'. While 'linking with' and 'flirting', children and young people received video messages from naked men, pornographic images and child sexual abuse images. Some children and young people were putting their personal details online, without having any awareness of the risks that might be posed to them as a result.

Pornography

NSPCC practitioners reported that some of the children and young people had been reported by school staff, and had sometimes acknowledged themselves, as having seen pornography. In the worst cases, some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be "addicted" to watching it. In such cases, children and young people could want help to manage their consumption of pornographic material.

Wellbeing

NSPCC practitioners and children and young people had described how some children and young people had struggled with feelings of depression and anxiety and some self-harmed. Sometimes, this was understood by children and young people to be a result of their experience of a stressful family life. While children and young people experienced stress in their family life and at school, they could also, at the same time, find school and family life a source of entertainment and enjoyment. Sources of enjoyment included sport, music and drama, visiting friends' houses and having sleepovers, going shopping or on holiday and having pets. Children and young people also strove to achieve academically despite the problems they faced; some received private tuition with the intention of passing exams in the future.

Experience, knowledge and attitudes

Experience of sex varied. Some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be sexually active from the age of 12. Knowledge about sex, consent, sexual abuse and exploitation also varied. Part of the reason for why children and young people had a poor understanding of sex and consent was that, in some schools, children and young people did not receive sex education until they had reached Year 9, aged 13. NSPCC practitioners said that some children and young people had only ever discussed the topic of sex with other children and young people and had never discussed the topic with an adult.

Safeguarding

Children and young people who had had experience of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse or other forms of abuse, reported having made changes to the types of thing they did, prior to attending group work, to lower the likelihood of being subject to abuse in the future. Two children and young people, who participated in the evaluation interviews, reported withdrawing from larger social groupings and instead fostered a smaller friendship group. Some children and young people, having experienced humiliation at the hands of their peer group following a naked image having been shared, reported having increased resolve to reject further requests for naked images. Children and young people also described re-evaluating their relationship with alcohol and changing the amount of alcohol they consumed after incidents where they had been humiliated or assaulted following intoxication. Some children and young people stopped using social media to reassess their relationships, in light of personal experiences of being humiliated through the use of social media applications. Sometimes, parents and professionals took action to increase the safety of children and young people. Phones were removed from children and young people by parents permanently and schools in school time, to prevent the sending of nude images and bullying. Some children and young people, aware of the stresses of their family life, emphasised how important it was for them to protect their younger siblings from family members and possible harm.

Children and young people's participation in and experience of group work

Being informed and giving consent

When children and young people who had been selected for group work were informed about the purpose of the group work, their understanding of what the group was about varied in line with the differing descriptions that had been provided to them by professionals.

Sometimes, the group had been described to children and young people as being about exploitation, other times about healthy relationships and sexual relationships. Some children and young people were not informed about the purpose of the group or the reason for their selection. When children and young people were not informed they could be left feeling confused.

“Sometimes if the school have not had an open dialogue with the young person they say ‘What have I done? I haven’t done anything?’ He was clearly anxious about why he had been identified.”

NSPCC practitioner

Some children and young people who had not been provided with an explanation made an educated guess about the purpose of the group. Some thought the group was going to be about raising confidence or helping with an issue with which they had previously received an intervention. Some guessed correctly that there was a concern with them sending naked images or that they were part of a friendship group vulnerable to exploitation. One young person, who guessed correctly that she had been selected for concerns about the sending of naked images, remained confused about why only she had been selected from a friendship group where everyone had been sending naked images.

Rather than being given a choice about whether to attend the group, children and young people were told that they were attending:

“The teacher said we would be doing it. I didn’t really think about [whether I wanted to attend or not] to be honest.”

Young person

Others, who were described by NSPCC practitioners as having been ‘shoehorned’ into attending, feared the consequences if they resisted. Not all children and young people who felt the group work was irrelevant felt free to leave the group. One young person, who had not been given a choice to attend the group, left one session mid-way through and made it clear that she did not want to do anymore. She described how she was later approached by a member of school staff, encouraged to attend, and decided to attend “so teachers wouldn’t bug [her]”.

Engagement in the group work

This section summarises children and young people's engagement with group work. Engagement is broken down into attendance at the group work sessions, the extent to which children and young people listened to and wanted to engage in a discussion about the topics and the extent to which children and young people reflected on personal experiences relevant to the topics discussed.

Attendance

Several factors were identified that influenced children and young people's attendance:

- Having a high level of need for support. Children and young people who experienced abuse and adversity were felt to be really engaged if they had the capacity to access help or disengaged if they lacked the capacity to draw on help because the stressors on their life required them to put their attentions and energies elsewhere.
- Attendance at school. Attendance at the group required attendance at school. Some group members did not attend school on the day of the group. This could be for a number of reasons: they did not attend school full time and the group was held on a day that they did not attend; they had been excluded from the school; they had absconded; or they were in the last year of school and had finished their exams so did not need to attend school any longer.
- Lack of attendance of the first few sessions, which could lead to exclusion from the group.

Engaging with the topics

The extent to which children and young people listened to and wanted to engage in a discussion about the topics brought up in group work varied. In some groups, children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be supportive of each other, listened and built on each other's comments. Children and young people could ask questions and show a willingness to be vulnerable in front of group members:

"And we find that they do listen... someone recently was talking about how he wakes up with a hard-on in the morning and I thought that was quite a brave thing to do because other kids in that group could have absolutely crucified him and made his life complete hell. But actually, it didn't go like that at all, it just opens up a discussion about sex and sexuality and about physical responses as well. And I think for boys there's still that stuff around 'what is it to be gay?' If someone's having sex with

you, if you get an erection does that mean you're enjoying it as opposed to it being a physical response to a stimuli?"

NSPCC practitioner

One of the key challenges that some NSPCC practitioners felt they had to overcome was in convincing children and young people whether they would have anything to say that addressed the realities they faced in their life. Overcoming this challenge was felt to have been met by starting off the group work by inviting children and young people to explain to the practitioners about their life, and then seeking to plan the group work around the issues that the children and young people brought up. It was also felt to have been helped by the use of resources or videos that explained how grooming and exploitation could work in contexts that children and young people faced. For example boy who 'gamed' were shown how a young boy had been groomed through his use of a 'gaming console'. Sometimes, children and young people would ask the NSPCC practitioners about their own experiences and views on issues.

At times, the behaviour of children and young people was said to be 'extremely challenging', with things being thrown around the room, children and young people mocking each other, winding each other up and provoking each other. Children and young people could talk over each other, with some members being louder than others and effectively inhibiting other children and young people's participation. In one group, it was said that some boys had bullied a particular boy in the group. In some of the groups, girls were said to have asked NSPCC practitioners to exclude the boys from the group, because they felt the boys' behaviour was disruptive and got in the way of their engaging in discussions around the topics that the practitioners had introduced. In boys' groups, boys could be said to have demonstrated 'bravado', boasting about their sexual activity, saying things to shock other children and young people and the practitioners, and wanting to appear funny and cool.

In some groups, engagement was said to be intermittent. In some cases, it was felt that children and young people could display an ambivalent attitude towards engagement, demonstrating an ability to engage with the concepts and ideas, while at the same time being disruptive or showing off:

"I'd never thought like that before."

Comment made at the end of a session to an NSPCC practitioner by a young person whose behaviour the practitioner said had been disruptive for the whole session

Relating their personal experiences

Children and young people's willingness to relate their own experiences to the issues identified in the group varied. In some groups, children and young people talked openly about their experiences, while in other groups, the children and young people did not. The section below on children and young people's contributions to group work provides the detail of what they shared. In some groups, boys were said by NSPCC practitioners to have demonstrated a degree of ambivalence in relation to whether the materials related to them. Some boys said that, while they were subject to requests for naked images and attempts at befriending them, they could look after themselves. NSPCC practitioners said that when boys were asked to reflect on whether they ever found themselves in situations online where they could be vulnerable to abuse, they would say that they did not, but then tell NSPCC practitioners about situations that demonstrated that they in fact did. In some groups, boys were said by NSPCC practitioners to have claimed that certain things would not happen to them, whereas in the NSPCC practitioner's opinion, it could.

Factors that influenced engagement

NSPCC practitioners identified a large number of factors that influenced children and young people's level of engagement with the group work experience. These factors could be grouped into experiences outside of the group work, interest in and comfort with the group work material, peer impact and the presence of school staff.

Experiences outside of the group work

Distressing experiences immediately prior to attendance in the group inhibited involvement and resulted in children and young people being visibly upset during the group. Children and young people who were experiencing chronic distress and adversity were also said to have found it difficult to participate. Being at risk of exploitation was felt to stop some children and young people engaging in discussions around grooming, because they did not want to be taken down a path of thought that would lead them to conclude that they were being groomed. Another factor was the children and young people's experiences of being listened to in school lessons generally, with some feeling that they had little opportunity to share and have their experiences listened to. Where this was the case, it was felt that they were more tentative in sharing their views in the first group work sessions.

Interest in and comfort with the group work material

Having an interest in some aspect of the group work was felt to have improved engagement. Some children and young people welcomed the opportunity to discuss:

- Personal thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- Issues relating to sex.

However, in some cases children and young people left the group, saying that the topics were not relevant to their life. Some children and young people who had been ‘shoehorned’ into the group made it clear that they did not want to be there by emphasising to those present that they ‘had to be there’. Others did not appear to be comfortable with discussions about exploitation. Children and young people that fell into these two groups were said by NSPCC practitioners to be less likely to attend. In one group, six out of seven boys walked out after being shown a video about a boy being groomed.

NSPCC workers reported that finding the right type of resource could be key to promoting engagement. In some cases, the use of films depicting grooming and exploitation was felt to have helped engage the children and young people. NSPCC workers felt that the films helped because they demonstrated how grooming and exploitation could happen to people who were like them, doing the types of things and in the context of the types of relationship that the children and young people in the group were in. One practitioner explained how a documentary made about a 14-year-old boy called Breck Bednar, who was murdered by an 18-year-old who had groomed Breck through online gaming, had helped.

“I think it’s the connection that they feel to whether it’s the character, or the level of maturity of the character...The Breck Bednar stuff managed to hook a lot of males.”

NSPCC practitioner

One practitioner felt that showing such videos helped demonstrate to the children and young people that the practitioner had some sense of the ‘reality’ that they faced in their lives.

“We had an experience in one of our groups where one girl seemed so disinterested about the whole thing and then at the very end of the session we explained and showed the NSPCC clip ‘Jay’ and she wrote in her feedback form ‘pretty boring apart from the video at the end’. And that was the thing that I feel got her to engage with the rest of our work...If you manage to get

it right the use of a resource which resonates indicates to the people in the room that you have some sense of what their reality is, and that you can understand what they then might tell you. Some teenagers assume you don't really know what their world is like."

NSPCC practitioner

Similarly, NSPCC practitioners found that children and young people could sometimes engage when the practitioner first recounted a relevant personal experience:

"What we find quite powerful is what we are willing to share on a personal basis, because it becomes more real to them, and that varies depending on whether you're talking to 12-year-olds vis-à-vis 15-year-olds; it's an individual choice for practitioners."

NSPCC practitioner

For example, in one case, an NSPCC practitioner recounting an experience of fear in response to being 'tooted' by men in cars as she walked home from school at the age of 13, prompted girls to recount how they too had experienced this. The girls explained how they sometimes went over to boys when beckoned by the boys although they did not really want to, but they did it because they were scared. The NSPCC practitioner had demonstrated vulnerability and she felt that this had opened up the possibility for children and young people to demonstrate vulnerability too. In some cases, having lots of small activities rather than concentrating on big one activity for a long period of time could help engagement.

Peer impact

Group members' trust in, feelings about and affinity for each other was said to have influenced engagement. Trust and affinity allowed for open discussion. Hearing peers share personal experiences was felt to have made the experience more meaningful and relevant to other children and young people. Hostility and distrust could result in arguments. The dominant or more confident members of the group were sometimes felt to have influenced the engagement of others, for the better or worse. If most of the children and young people in the group were interested, this could rub off on members who were initially disinterested. It was observed that some children and young people were sometimes encouraged to change their opinion on something by others with more forceful personalities.

Some members were subdued by the presence of others. Girls could be subdued by boys, boys by girls, younger ones by older ones, individuals by the presence of a tight-knit friendship group, and group members by the presence of close friends. Some children and young people found themselves being interrupted by other children and young people when they spoke or being “bullied” by groups of other children and young people in the group. Splitting the group into two could help when some children and young people in the group were more confident or dominant than others. Sometimes, it could feel easier to share personal experiences when the children and young people in the group were not close friends.

Groups where the members had different learning styles or needs meant that practitioners found it difficult to find an approach or topic that was to the satisfaction of all members. Boys and girls were felt to have different learning styles; girls were felt to be more into discussion and reflection, while boys were more into watching films and reaching judgements quickly rather than reflecting. In one group, where children who were deemed as being at risk of being exploited in the short-term were mixed with children who were not, those who were not deemed at risk were said by NSPCC practitioners to have questioned the relevance of the material for their lives:

“I think the other one, who isn't really in it, thought that they were all mad for engaging in that type of stuff, but I don't think she could quite believe they were all doing it.”

NSPCC practitioner

Children and young people with autism were said by NSPCC practitioners to have found it difficult to participate in the group work because they often struggled to cope with the presence of other people generally. The number of children and young people in the group could make a difference. Some NSPCC workers reported that, in their experience, having a lower number of children and young people in the group could promote attendance and confidence in discussing issues. However, they did not specify the numbers of children and young people who had been in their groups.

The presence of school staff

The presence of school staff was described as having a calming effect on children and young people, allowing practitioners to spend less time managing behaviour and more time delivering content.

Children and young people's participation in the group discussions

Children and young people made a range of contributions to the group work discussions. In so doing they made a significant contribution to the overall group work experience of other children and young people. Two types of contribution were made: recounting personal experiences and feelings, and expressing values and opinions.

Recounting personal experiences and feelings

Children and young people shared experiences and feelings. They talked about thoughts, feelings and experiences of sex and relationships, peer attitudes towards and expectations of sex, relationships, and the practice of sending and receiving naked images. They talked about issues not directly related to exploitation and sexual abuse, including feeling low, relationships with carers, and about feeling the need to carry knives with them when they walked the street. They discussed a range of abusive experiences, including being harassed, groomed, abused, assaulted, taunted, bullied, controlled and exploited. Some young boys who started out representing themselves as not having vulnerability, with time could show vulnerability. For example, one boy who reported carrying a knife with him on the streets, explained at first that he did it out of choice, later on reported doing it because he felt pressure to do it and explained how he felt terrified about having to carry a weapon.

Expressing values and opinions

Children and young people expressed a variety of values and opinions and sometimes they advised each other on issues. Some of these views were in support of the values and perspectives that NSPCC practitioners espoused, to do with respecting people's right to say no to participation in sexual activities. Values and opinions were sometimes at odds with NSPCC practitioners and included:

- Women not having the right to say no to sex in marriage.
- That performing a sexual act for someone would be worth it if the money was right.
- That if a young person gets raped when they are drunk then that is their own fault.
- Nagging and harassing a girl into saying yes to sex is acceptable.
- Girls who had had sex could be referred to as “slags” or “sluts”.
- An expectation for girls to look like models.

- An expectation that girls should perform sexual acts when boys wanted and to perform the types of sexual act they had seen performed in pornographic films.
- That watching pornographic films was “great fun”.

Sometimes, these views were announced in a way that sought to normalise the perspective among group members. However group members could contest attempts at normalisation:

“When we asked what you valued about your relationships, one male said ‘Yeh, she’s got to have a good body, she can’t be fat, she can’t be this, she can’t be that. The majority of the group members challenged him straight away.”

NSPCC practitioner

Children and young people’s satisfaction and views

Children and young peoples’ level of satisfaction and their level of comfort with the group work experience varied. Some children and young people enjoyed finding out about issues relating to sexual health, relationships and sex because they had not previously been able to discuss these topics with adults. Some enjoyed the opportunity to share personal experiences and problems – for some, the group represented the only opportunity they had for a safe space in which they could discuss their problems and issues without fearing condemnation or criticism:

“Loved it. [The practitioners were] really nice and friendly. It was my happy place. I felt safe. They make you feel comfortable; I could talk if something was wrong.”

Young person

One young person explained that she had felt able to ask the NSPCC practitioners for a C-Card, a card enabling children and young people between the ages of 13 and 25 to get confidential access to condoms, supported by written material (Come Correct, 2019). She had felt too embarrassed to ask for one from school staff. Children and young people who disclosed exploitation or concerns were said by NSPCC practitioners to have felt relieved by the end of the group because disclosing had allowed them to get a weight off their mind. Some were said by NSPCC practitioners to have left the group feeling confident they could identify where grooming might be happening; others felt that they had not learned anything new but had appreciated the opportunity to have a ‘recap’.

Children and young people could indicate discomfort with sessions by: slumping in seats, questions being raised about how long the session was going to last for, lack of engagement with group discussion, having a ‘couldn’t be bothered’ attitude, being in low mood or tired, making it clear that one had never wanted to be in the group, throwing furniture around, sitting with their coat tucked closely to their chin, playing with a phone, missing sessions and leaving the group. Practitioners felt that smirking, laughing and giggling during discussions indicated embarrassment with the topics. According to practitioners and schools staff some children and young people also found it difficult to watch the videos, which brought home the risks to them:

“She found it very difficult to watch some of the videos. And, when I asked her what that was about, and she said because she recognised that that's what was happening to her and it was very difficult to see and think about herself in that light, being that vulnerable.”

School safeguarding officer

Discomfort with the group experience could lead to children and young people leaving the group. Boys included in mixed gender groups were said by NSPCC practitioners to have not attended again after the first session. Distress was caused for one young person when things shared in confidence with group members were shared by group members with children and young people outside of the group. Where children and young people did not complete the group work, practitioners attempted to ascertain if the children and young people were experiencing risk of exploitation and referred the children and young people to services where appropriate.

Key findings on children and young people's participation in and experience of group work

Children and young people's engagement with and participation in group work discussions was influenced by: how their day had gone; the level of stress and adversity they faced in life generally; and relationships with other group members.

Comfort with sharing personal views and experiences was related to how they felt about group members and NSPCC practitioners, and listening to other people share their experiences.

Children and young people enjoyed and valued: finding out about issues relating to sexual health, relationships and sex because they had not previously been able to discuss these topics with adults; and sharing personal experiences and problems.

Smirking, laughing and giggling during discussions could indicate embarrassment with the topics. Some children and young people were said by practitioners to have found it difficult watching videos dramatizing incidents of child sexual exploitation when doing so raised awareness of the risks they faced in their lives.

Chapter 4: Change, impact and effectiveness

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether the Protect & Respect group work made a difference to the lives of the children and young people who accessed it. The chapter starts by reporting on the types of change that children and young people accessing the service experienced during the work. It then looks at ways in which the Protect & Respect group work brought about change and the role played by other factors. The findings for this section draw on the perspectives gained from children and young people, NSPCC practitioners, referring professionals and case notes written by NSPCC practitioners on the work done with children and young people. Finally, it should be pointed out that, to the extent that this report looks at impact, it does so drawing on the information fed back and views from participants in the evaluation interviews. The findings on impact are based on a small amount of analysis of the quantitative data. The quantitative data will be subject to a full analysis at a later date. A significant amount of evaluation attrition combined with a large variation in the way group work was delivered will limit the significance of what the analysis can say about the effectiveness of group work (see Appendix C of the discussion report [Williams, 2019a] for a full description and discussion of the methodology used).

Change for children and young people

Children and young people accessing the group work were reported by NSPCC practitioners to have experienced improvement in the following areas during their involvement with the service:

- Understanding about sex, bodies, sexual health, contraception, relationships, consent, techniques used to groom and exploit, the law around sending naked images, how allegations of sexual abuse are dealt with by the criminal justice system, what creates vulnerability to exploitation and actions that could be taken to get help or lower the risk of being exploited. One girl said she had learned about how boys tried to befriend girls when their true intentions were to exploit them:

“They try and be your friends first, and then they start, like, worming their way in quickly, especially older ones, like, if they drive – a girl loves a boy that drives. Or normally girls my age go for people older; that’s just because of the maturity in them. And then they start buying you alcohol obviously and then it’s like ‘Oh you can stay in mine if you’ve got family problems’, and they normally go for the people that have got family problems because they’re vulnerable and they’re easy to get to.”

Young person

Some children and young people were surprised to hear that boys could be the victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, and that sometimes children could be the victims of people they already knew. Some boys were said by NSPCC practitioners to have been shocked to find out that receiving a naked image from a peer was illegal, even if the peer had consented to sharing the image. Improved understanding about concepts like consent was not necessarily accompanied with an acceptance of the values underpinning consent. Some boys were judged to have been exposed to and have understood the concept of consent for the first time but they did not necessarily agree that girls had the right to say no to sexual interaction with them.

- Awareness of the risks posed to themselves by particular situations. Some children and young people were able to apply increased understanding about grooming, exploitation and sexual assault to develop a better awareness of the risks they faced in particular situations. One young person noted how she was more aware of how taking up the offer of a lift from a male she did not know heightened the risk of sexual assault. NSPCC practitioners said some children and young people had re-evaluated the risks posed with sending naked images. Children and young people were sometimes able to recognise that they were in a controlling relationship, being groomed or being exploited:

“One of the young pupils actually turned around, she’d had a text one day and she said, ‘He’s trying to control me.’”

Referring professional

- Action taken to reduce the risk of abuse, grooming and exploitation. NSPCC practitioners said some children and young people had reduced the amount of information they had made available on social media applications.

- Questioning what to expect from relationships. In some cases, children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be questioning what they should expect from relationships even if this had not resulted in a determination to expect something different from them.
- Preparedness to take action to avoid heightening the risk of abuse or to take action when the risk was heightened. Examples included: a new determination to reject offers of relationships with people who they had met in online environments, and to report such attempts to professionals or parents; a new determination not to take offers of car rides from men they did not know; and new expectations around healthy relationships, based on an increased understanding about consent and the need to respect sexual boundaries.
- Judgement on where responsibility lay for abuse, away from the victim and with the perpetrator.
- Ability to recognise anxiety and fear, through the use of activities described in the activities section in Chapter 2 of this report.
- Being able to acknowledge one's own vulnerability. In some cases, it was felt that children and young people had for the first time been able to acknowledge their own vulnerability.
- Wellbeing. A mixed picture of change is revealed for children and young people's wellbeing through the analysis of the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS) scores. Children and young people completed these at two points: at the beginning of the group work (Time 1) and at the end (Time 2). The ORS has a clinical cut-off: scores underneath the cut-off point represent higher needs experienced by people requiring a therapeutic response; and scores above the cut-off are in the normal range (Duncan, 2011). The analysis of children and young people's scores focused on the number of children and young people who moved across the clinical threshold during the period of the group work. For most children and young people who completed the ORS at both time points, there was no change: three quarters did not cross the clinical threshold for wellbeing (see Table 1). One in four children and young people did improve and crossed the clinical threshold in the hoped-for direction.

Table 1: Outcome measure data for children and young people who completed a Time 1 and Time 2 measure

Relationship between ORS scores for children and young people between the start and end of group work	Number of children and young people (n=187)
Well-being improved, moved from below the clinical threshold to above it	43
Well-being worsened, moved from above the clinical threshold to below it	7
Well-being stayed good, stayed above the clinical threshold	84
Well-being stayed bad, stayed below the clinical threshold	53

No change or negative change

Not all children and young people had experienced improvements in outcomes. It was explained that some children and young people had not understood the concepts being discussed; some had understood the concepts but had not considered the relevance of them to their own lives; or it was felt they would be unable to apply them to situations where there was a high level of risk. Some boys had understood the concepts behind healthy sexual relationships and consent but had not adopted the values. Some children and young people had engaged with the content, but they had continued to do things that practitioners felt increased the risk of being exploited. For example, while some children and young people had started to reassess the value of sending images, this had not resulted in them stopping sending and receiving them. It was felt that for some children and young people, the experience of learning about sexual boundaries and consent would not lead to an immediate change in their relationships and how they were treated within those relationships.

Some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to have experienced a range of negative outcomes during the group work:

- Hypervigilance, which was said to have impaired the ability of children and young people to make friends.
- Misunderstanding. One young person, for example, understood that the legal age of consent for sex was 13. Another young person understood that sexual exploitation was when a young person was forced into sexual activity.
- Distress.

Reduced risk of exploitation

In practice, the children and young people who were accepted into group work experienced a range of vulnerability and risk, with some experiencing abuse, neglect, sexual assault and exploitation leading up to and during the group work. NSPCC practitioners were asked if, generally speaking, they felt the group work lowered the risk of exploitation. There was a range of responses, including: being unsure (some practitioners pointed out that they did not know what had happened to the children and young people after the group work had finished so they could not know); hoping the group work had lowered the risk of exploitation, but unable to point to evidence that it had; feeling confident that the risk had been reduced for some children and young people; and being clear that particular children and young people had not experienced a lowering in the risk of exploitation.

Explaining positive change

While the previous section of this report identified where change had occurred for children and young people, this section explores the perceived and reported reasons for that change. The reported reasons given for change are divided into sections focused on the following types of change:

- Improved awareness of situational risks.
- Improved ability to identify and lower risks.
- Improved preparedness for not sending and receiving naked images.
- Increased wellbeing.
- Improved ability to acknowledge vulnerability.
- Starting to question what to expect from relationships.
- Lowering the risk of exploitation.
- Disclosures.

Explaining improved awareness of the risks posed by situations that the child or young person experienced

Improved awareness of the risks posed by situations that the child or young person experienced was brought about by:

- Hearing children and young people recount personal experiences. Children and young people's participation in the group work discussions were felt to have been a key factor in improving other children and young people's awareness of the risks they themselves experienced in particular situations. Hearing children and young people recount personal experiences about how manipulative

and organised potential perpetrators could be was identified as particularly impactful. Children and young people could be shocked about the lengths to which people could go to groom and exploit.

- Watching films about children and young people being exploited in situations that the child or young person had experienced or was involved in.

“Especially with some of the girl groups, some of the stuff was quite, not particularly hard hitting, but it made them think when they were showing some of the videos, it actually made the girls think, which was really, really good.”

NSPCC practitioner

- One young person said she had stopped going for rides in cars with males that she did not know very well, after having seen a film that had spelt out how the risk of being sexually assaulted was raised in these situations. Boys who had seen videos about male-on-male exploitation online had been prompted to change the privacy settings on their online accounts and to question the consequences that might result from sending naked images.
- Hearing NSPCC practitioners’ accounts of how exploitation worked. In some cases, listening to NSPCC practitioners talk about how people could abuse and exploit people they already know and how boys could be the victims of abuse and exploitation could lead to children and young people re-evaluating the risks they faced.

Explaining improved ability to identify and lower risks

NSPCC practitioners felt the following activities helped improve children and young people’s ability to identify and lower actual risks when involved in situations where the risk of exploitation or abuse was heightened:

- Exercises designed to improve children and young people’s ability to recognise anxiety and fear, which were felt to have improved their ability to recognise when there was a heightened risk of abuse or exploitation.
- Exercises done with children and young people to plan what they could do to lower the risk or exit situations where the risk of abuse or exploitation had heightened. This included creating plans with children and young people about who they could contact if they were involved in a situation when they did not feel safe.
- Seeing and discussing a video about a young person who was murdered, having been groomed by someone through gaming, was felt to have influenced some boys to increase the privacy of their gaming accounts.

Explaining increased preparedness not to send and receive naked images

Knowing that sending and receiving naked images was illegal did deter some children and young people, but not all. Furthermore, preparedness to send and receive images was said to have been diminished by understanding that being charged and convicted could damage education and career prospects, and realising that the images could be shared on social media sites. Children and young people participating in evaluation interviews also explained how previous experiences of having had images shared with peer groups and the possibility of having their phone confiscated had diminished their preparedness to send and receive images.

Explaining increased wellbeing

In some cases NSPCC practitioners felt children and young people's wellbeing was improved from attending group work sessions. This happened in the following ways through those children and young people who:

- Had a history of conflict with school staff having an experience in which they felt able to make a positive contribution to the activity and have a positive relationship with adults.
- Had few friends having the opportunity to have a shared experience, which helped bond them with other children and young people.
- Did not feel listened to by school staff being given the opportunity share and give an opinion.
- Were not being nurtured by their carers and who did not have a close relationship with a teacher, and who were being assaulted, harassed and exploited, were said by NSPCC practitioners to have welcomed the opportunity to feel listened to and receive some support, without being judged.

Causing children and young people to question what to expect from relationships

Children and young people could start to question what they should expect from relationships even if this had not resulted in a determination to expect something different from them. NSPCC practitioners felt this questioning had been encouraged by opening up a space in which children and young people could be more reflective of their experiences:

“Whether we’ve lowered the likelihood of children and young people sharing naked images is a difficult one and it’s something that we’ve asked ourselves at the end, ‘Have we actually achieved that?’ And I don’t know if in a seven-week programme you can do that. But I think we’ve definitely opened up the discussion and we have a good mix in the group in terms of opening up the debate and giving the different sides of it... so I think we’ve just planted seeds of doubt in their minds... it was more exploring with them, ‘Why are you doing this?’... and them saying, ‘Well, actually, I don’t really know what we’re getting from it.’ And then we’re asking them, ‘Does this make you more popular or does this make guys like you more? Or do they respect you more doing it?’ and they say, ‘Well, no, they don’t’... So I think for young person number one, definitely she came away really thinking about things.”

NSPCC practitioner

Reasons for why group work had decreased the risk of exploitation

Where NSPCC practitioners felt that group work had helped to decrease the risk of exploitation, they identified outcomes that children and young people had achieved, which the practitioners assumed would trigger a reduction in risk. It was felt that:

- Increased awareness about how grooming worked would result in being better able to identify and respond to possible attempts at grooming:

“[The group work activity] should lead to an increase in [the young person’s] knowledge and understanding of these crucial issues and this should hopefully increase her resilience to CSE.”

NSPCC practitioner case note

- Being more aware of their vulnerability to exploitation or risk of being exploited would mean being more alert to attempts at grooming.
- Developing expectations about healthy relationships and the right to consent would increase avoidance of relationships that were controlling, abusive and exploitative.
- Being better able to recognise feelings of anxiety and fear and being better prepared to take action were they to find themselves in a dangerous situation would mean being a better able to identify dangerous situations.

- Reducing the amount of personal information made available on social media or being more determined to reject offers of relationships from strangers online would reduce the likelihood of them being manipulated and groomed.

Disclosure

Disclosure of self-harm occurred in the context of one-to-one discussions with the practitioner, in groups where the practitioner had the habit of discussing Outcome Rating Scale scores with children and young people who were seen to have low scores.

Explaining negative change

One NSPCC practitioner said that she felt that a variety of exercises had contributed to a young person experiencing hypervigilance. Information about how being groomed could lead to exploitation had made some children and young people cautious about making friends with people and with existing relationships. Wellbeing was decreased for children and young people when personal information shared with group members was relayed to other children and young people in the school by group members.

Explaining no change

Why the risk of exploitation had not been reduced for some children and young people

Some NSPCC practitioners felt that group work had helped to decrease the risk of exploitation, based on the assumption that improvements in the child or young person's life would have led to a decrease in the risks faced by them. However, in certain cases it was acknowledged that not all children and young people had achieved the improvements in outcome that were needed to underpin a lowering in risk. Other NSPCC practitioners and children and young people felt that, while having the opportunity to learn about exploitation was a good thing, it would not be enough to lower the risk of exploitation. It was felt that children and young people themselves could not through their own volition effectively change the risk of exploitation to themselves, even if they had improved understanding, risk awareness and took risk-avoidant actions:

“Well, it can easily happen, couldn't it? It can happen to anyone.”

Young person

In some cases, it was felt that the situations in which children and young people were involved that heightened the risk of exploitation and abuse were not affected by a lack of understanding of the risks:

“[The young person] said all the right things and said everything that she knew was wrong, but I really don't think that's going to stop her from doing anything.”

NSPCC practitioner

Factors that influenced the risks faced by children and young people that lay outside of their control and that were not affected by group work were:

- The widespread and constant harassment of girls by boys for naked images and sexual activity. While young girls could understand the concept of consent in relation to their right to refuse requests for naked images, they were, by being harassed, not in an environment that enabled them to exercise their right to consent.
- The normalisation and acceptance of sending, receiving and handling naked images among children and young people.
- Involvement of responsible adults in parties and informal gatherings involving alcohol and inebriation where boys would wait until girls got drunk to assault them.

“If this is what's happening at 14, what's it going to be like when we start going to clubs, when we're older? In clubs, people can spike your drinks, you've got to watch out.”

Young person

- Community and familial values that did not respect a female's right to give their consent before engagement in sexual activity.
- Lack of nurturing and protective behaviours from carers, sometimes combined with already established relationships with people who were abusive or exploitative but offered validation and acceptance. The feeling of being validated and accepted by people who exploit or abuse them was felt to trump any aspiration that some children and young people might have for a better type of relationship. In the absence of a better option, some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be likely to remain in the exploitative or abusive relationship.

Why understanding was not always improved

Factors that hindered improvements in understanding were:

- Attendance. Those who attended fewer sessions were felt less likely to have an improved understanding.
- Having a low level of English and without the presence of an interpreter given the group was provided in English.
- Not understanding what the group was about or why one had been selected for the group. Group members who were not given the choice of providing informed consent and who had been selected for the group for some reason other than being vulnerable to exploitation sometimes lacked a frame of reference with which they could make sense of what was going on in the group:

“You can ask the other girls. I wasn't answering many questions because I didn't know what I was doing.”

Young person (who had not been informed about the purpose of the group or why they had been selected and was not regarded as at risk of exploitation by the NSPCC practitioner)

- Having a good prior knowledge of exploitation, setting security options on social media applications and consent. Those who had previously attended similar types of group work or who had personal experiences were felt to already have a good understanding of the topics.

Why children and young people were not able to apply information to their own lives

Factors that hindered children and young people's ability to apply information were:

- Insufficient mental capacity and ability to apply information in the right situations. One NSPCC practitioner felt that distinguishing between the early development of a genuine friendship and being groomed required sophisticated cognitive skills and experience.
- Having insufficient opportunities within the group work sessions to consider the relevance of the information to their lives and to challenge the attitude that ‘it wouldn't happen to me’. In some groups, it was felt there was not enough time available to enable children and young people to reflect on the personal relevance of the material to their own lives.
- Children and young people would not always want to explore personal experiences and risks because they would not want other group members to know about what they were experiencing, or because they did not believe that anything could be done to make life safer and more secure.

Why values were not changed

Practitioners suggested that where children and young people were not being prepared to open up their thinking to different perspectives, this could inhibit the scope for change. Disruptive behaviour in the group could make it difficult for group members to open their thinking to new perspectives and information.

Other outcomes

Friends of children and young people

Children and young people also developed new insights into the risks posed to their friends, which in some cases led to them challenging their friends, suggesting their new relationships with adults were the first step in the grooming process.

School staff

The relationships established between NSPCC practitioners and school staff were felt to have impacted on the following outcomes for school staff:

- Safeguarding leads became more responsive to safeguarding concerns.
- Staff who co-delivered the group work were more likely to spot safeguarding concerns.
- Better safeguarding in schools was said to have led to more children attending the school being identified as being at risk and referred to Children's Services.

NSPCC practitioner views on making group work more effective

Supporting children and young people to apply the information to their lives

The following amendments were suggested to the group work programme, to help children and young people understand the relevance of the material for themselves:

- More sessions or longer sessions (up to two hours long).
- Less time spent on delivering information and more time spent on allowing children and young people to challenge and reflect.

- Having a one-to-one session with each group work member, after each group work session, which it was felt would help children and young people apply the learning without having to divulge personal information that would then need to be shared with group members.

Whole-school interventions and interventions with carers

Some NSPCC practitioners felt that the risk of exploitation posed to children and young people in schools could not be effectively lowered without working with everyone in the school. It was recommended that interventions be done with:

- Those who posed a risk of exploitation, including schoolboys.
- School children, to challenge the normalisation of the sending of naked images.
- Carers, to raise their understanding and ability to protect and nurture their children:

“If that’s an issue that’s coming up in a particular year group in that school, then surely having three or four pupils from that problem isn’t really going to change things, to be honest. It may make them consider things, but in reality I don’t think it’s going to change much of their behaviours. Whereas if you can reach more of those children and young people, then I would think you’d be able to reach more of that problem.”

NSPCC practitioner

Universal provision

Some NSPCC practitioners felt that preventative education should be provided to all children and young people, because all children and young people were vulnerable to exploitation. NSPCC practitioners recommended that sexual exploitation education be provided through Personal, Social, Health and Education (PSHE) lessons. PSHE lessons are a non-statutory duty placed on schools by the government. The government expects PSHE lessons to include sex and relationship education and to equip children and young people with “a sound understanding of risk and with the knowledge and skills necessary to make safe and informed decisions” (DFE, 2013). Some NSPCC practitioners felt that part of the PSHE provision for preventing abuse and exploitation should be focused on seeking to challenge misogynistic attitudes towards girls and women. It was suggested by NSPCC practitioners that the NSPCC might use its experience of providing group work to advise and influence the

Government on how it roles its agenda of compulsory sex education out among schools.

Discussion

This is a report on the findings from an evaluation of a group work intervention delivered to children affected by sexual exploitation. It forms one of three reports that have been published together, which are focused on the NSPCC's Protect & Respect programme of services designed to support children affected by sexual exploitation. This report serves as a detailed companion report to the discussion, providing more detail on the implementation of the group work service. A full discussion of the implications of the findings of this report, together with the findings from the evaluation of the one-to-one service, can be found in the programme's discussion report (Williams, 2019a).

Key findings on change, impact and effectiveness

A range of positive outcomes for children and young people were reported by NSPCC practitioners, including: improved understanding, awareness and a preparedness to take actions.

There was a difference of opinion over whether these outcomes lowered the risk of exploitation for children and young people. Some practitioners considered that they did, but other practitioners and some children and young people felt that the outcomes were not sufficient to lead to a reduction in risk. This was because the risks posed to children and young people were seen as a function of the intentions and behaviours of people around the children and young people.

NSPCC practitioners reported that not all children and young people experienced improved outcomes as a result of attending group work.

Negative outcomes for children and young people reported by practitioners included becoming hypervigilant after receiving information about grooming, and becoming distressed when information shared within the group was shared with people outside of the group.

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4 This report is available by request to: researchadvice@nspcc.org.uk

Appendix A: the number of children and young people accessing group work

Table 2: The number of children and young people who accessed at least one session of Protect & Respect group work, by service centre

Service centre number	Number of children and young people who accessed at least one group
1	2
2	53
3	0
4	18
5	28
6	0
7	14
8	21
9	89
10	59
11	0
12	0
13	203
14	17
15	17
Total	521

Appendix B: demographic breakdown of users

Table 3: Age of users accessing Protect & Respect group work

Age of users	Number of users
10–12	130
13–16	377
17–18	9
20–21	2
No data	3
Total	521

Table 4: Gender of users accessing Protect & Respect group work

Age of users	Number of users
Female	420
Male	85
No data	16
Total	521

Table 5: Ethnicity of users accessing Protect & Respect group work

Age of users	Number of users
Any other ethnic group	69
British	3
Czech	4
Other	1
Polish	1
Portuguese	1
Roma	16
Slovakian	37
Somali	2
Blank	4
Any other White Background	20
Bangladeshi	11
Indian	6
Pakistani	11
African	1
Caribbean	3
Other Black	10
Other Mixed	19
White and Asian	4
White and Black African	3
White and Black Caribbean	20
Arab	2
Prefer not to say	1

Age of users	Number of users
White British	304
White Gypsy or Traveller	1
White Irish	3
Blank	33
Total	521

Table 6: Sexual orientation of users accessing Protect & Respect group work

Age of users	Number of users
Bisexual	1
Gay Man	2
Heterosexual	31
Other	2
Practice decision not to ask	193
Prefer not to say	3
Unsure	2
Blank	287
Total	521

Table 7: Religion of users accessing Protect & Respect group work

Age of users	Number of users
Atheist	3
Christian	109
Hindu	1
Muslim	35
No religion	110
Not stated	135
Other	13
Practice decision not to ask	8
Prefer not to say	2
Sikh	1
Blank	104
Total	521

Appendix C: variability in the delivery of group work and the reasons for that variability

The delivery of group work varied across the following areas:

- Outcomes aimed for.
- Topics covered.
- Depths to which topics were covered.
- The sequencing of topics covered.
- The duration, frequency and number of sessions delivered.
- Staff delivering the group.
- The resources used.
- The activities done.
- Whether children and young people were informed about the purpose of the group and reasons for their selection into the group.
- Whether children and young people were provided with the freedom to choose not to participate.
- Type of introductory work done by NSPCC practitioners with children and young people.
- Time invested in getting to know each child or young person prior to the group work starting.
- Number of sessions.
- Length of each session.
- Number of children and young people in the group.
- Type of children and young people in the group. Some groups were composed of children and young people with different gender and ethnicity, while others were not.
- Practice of excluding children and young people who did not attend early sessions.
- Time period over which the group work is run.
- Type, suitability and consistency of the room used.
- Use of an interpreter.
- Type of staff who delivered the work.
- Extent to which group work is focused on provision of information vs group discussion.

- Extent to which children and young people are allowed to discuss and challenge the ideas.
- Whether additional work was done with carers and school staff.

Factors that affected the variability in the delivering of group work:

- **Use of the two different group work models.** Some practitioners planned sessions around the first group work model guidance from 2014; others used the second guidance from 2017. Some practitioners developed their own approach, different to both models, developing the group work programme over the experiences and preferences that children and young people had brought up in the first session.
- **School timetable, class time duration and term dates.** The frequency, duration and gap between sessions and the topics covered were adapted to fit.
- **Schools preferences for topics avoided.** Mention of condoms in one group was avoided on request of the school head.
- **Prioritisation of group discussion.** Where this occurred, it was not always possible to cover all the topics in the model guide.
- **Children and young people's interests.** Interest in sexually transmitted diseases prompted the invitation of a guest speaker specialising in sexual health.
- **Children and young people's needs.** Topics could be included or omitted, and more or less time could be devoted to topics, depending on their perceived relevance to children and young people.
- **Children and young people's level of understanding.** Lack of understanding on consent prompted staff to spend more time discussing the issue.
- **Children and young people's learning style.** Recapping and forewarning children and young people about the topics to be discussed was felt to be helpful for children and young people with learning needs. Watching films and avoiding detailed discussions was felt to work with some groups of boys.
- **Children and young people's capacity for applying learning.** More opportunities to apply the learning to hypothetical scenarios were given to children and young people with learning needs because it was felt they did not find it easy to apply learning to real-life situations.

- **Children and young people’s literacy levels and understanding of English.** Where groups were composed of children and young people who had limited English and were illiterate in their own language, more time was spent going over the core concepts of consent and grooming, because it was felt that the concepts did not have strong equivalents in other languages.
- **The potential for children and young people to be disturbed by the material.** Discussions on sexual exploitation were delivered later in the group work when it was felt that discussion in the first session would have been too disturbing. Where group members were younger, ‘hard hitting’ sexual exploitation resources were avoided. Videos on sexual exploitation, described as ‘harrowing’ by one NSPCC practitioner, were followed by ‘happier’ activities so children and young people did not leave the group feeling disturbed.
- **Children and young people’s limitations for achieving outcomes.** Because it was felt that some children and young people with learning disabilities lacked the mental ability to get better at identifying situational risk, time with them was focused on improving their ability to recognise the feeling of fear and raising their awareness of the need to act on that feeling.
- **Children and young people’s potential for development.** Where it was felt that children and young people had difficulty recognising their emotions but had the potential to improve, more time was spent recognising and responding to feelings.
- **Practitioners’ perception of the likelihood of children and young people engaging with services.** On the assumption that one group of girls from a particular community would be unlikely to call on mainstream services if they were vulnerable, girls were encouraged to make a commitment to supporting each other after the group had come to an end.

Appendix D: children and young people's experiences prior to and during group work

This section describes the lives of the children and young people who accessed group work, with a special focus on the ways in which children and young people experienced sexual exploitation or vulnerability or risk of sexual exploitation.

Experiences of vulnerability, risk and exploitation

The model guidance required that children and young people be referred when they were vulnerable to exploitation. Children and young people who were deemed to be at risk of exploitation or who were being exploited were not to be allocated to the group work service. In practice, however, as has been explained in the previous chapter, children and young people experiencing exploitation or at risk of exploitation were referred and allocated to the service. The level of vulnerability of children and young people who accessed group work varied and included:

- Children and young people who were not felt to be more vulnerable than any other child or young person to exploitation.
- Children and young people who were vulnerable or considered at risk owing to involvement in situations that were felt to raise vulnerability and risk. This included children and young people having online conversations with strangers or revealing personal details online without there being clear concerns that they were actually being exploited.
- Children and young people who were giving compliments, gifts, affection, emotional intimacy and the pretence or reality of a relationship, in return for sexual favours and sexual or naked images. These children and young people were both vulnerable and being exploited.

Girls who experienced exploitation alongside a range of other types of abuse, at the hands of male peers

This section is about young girls who, besides being vulnerable to exploitation, were also at risk of or were experiencing sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual humiliation by peers. NSPCC practitioners and children and young people interviewed as part of the evaluation described how young girls, belonging to what a young person referred to as the 'popular' group, could be subject to sexual exploitation, sexual assault, sexual harassment and sexual humiliation

by groups of boys who also belonged to the popular group. People in the popular group were said by NSPCC practitioners to have experienced neglect, abuse and distress in the family home. They depended on peers for validation, acceptance and a sense of belonging. Members of the popular group were also said to be sexually attractive, intelligent, into sport, dressing in a sexual way and interested in having sexual experiences. Although members of the popular group were said by NSPCC practitioners to like boasting about the number of friends they had and felt pride in having more friends, life within the group was characterised by an ongoing struggle for status. Boys were said by NSPCC practitioners to occupy the highest position in the group, girls the lowest. Girls within the group were said to have sought the validation and acceptance of boys.

“I think it is run by boys.”

NSPCC practitioner

Boys cemented their position in relation to girls through a process of labelling based, in part, on the degree to which boys or girls were deemed to be sexually active. Boys, when sexually active, were attributed celebratory labels like ‘fuckboys’. Girls were attributed labels designed to humiliate, induce guilt and make them feel bad about themselves. This was irrespective of whether they were deemed to be sexually active. When they were deemed to be sexually active, they were called ‘slag’, ‘slut’ or ‘easy’. When they were deemed to be sexually inactive, they were called ‘frigid’. Boys also cemented their status by attempting to control the whereabouts and possessions of the girls they had relationships with. Alongside ongoing attempts to humiliate and control girls, boys used a variety of techniques to perform sexual acts on, receive sexual acts from, sexually assault and get sexualised or naked images from girls. Techniques used were exploitative in that in exchange for sexual acts, boys used:

- Charm.
- Affected intimacy and care.
- Minimisation techniques, playing down the significance of a girl sending a naked image.
- The offer of lifts in cars.

But some techniques used force and involved:

- Harassment.
- Threatening to damage a girl’s reputation among peers.
- Physical violence.

Once a girl had been sexually assaulted or provided some kind of sexual pleasure to the boy, the relationship with the boy could be brought to an end. Sometimes techniques of exploitation could be used to lure girls into a situation where an assault was then carried out. Boys would also use their popularity to set up situations that caused the girls to compete with each other for their attentions, by having sexual relationships with two or more girls and then letting both girls know, with the hope that the girls would fall out with each other and have a fight. Performing sexual acts on or receiving sexual acts from girls, sexually assaulting girls, getting sexualised or naked images from girls, controlling girls and causing conflict between them were seen as sources of entertainment and achievements that raised boys' status among peers.

Girls complained about being humiliated, harassed, assaulted or exploited. They bemoaned the male attitude towards females, and the way boys felt free to manipulate, exploit and sexually assault girls and how they boasted about what they did to girls with their friends. Such experiences had pushed one young person into wanting to study the psychology of people who ended up in prison:

"It's sad to think that you just want a night out. Why are people so messed up? Why can't they just leave people alone?"

Young person

Girls explained how being treated in this way left them feeling saddened, depressed and ashamed. Some girls reported resisting attempts to get sexual favours or images. They did this by:

- Arguing with their boyfriends.
- Removing people who made requests for images on their list of social contacts.
- Exposing people who had made the request by sharing it with others.
- Providing an aggressively worded rejection of the request.
- Threatening physical violence.
- In some cases, having other boys carry out the threat of physical violence.
- Researching identities of people they did not know who had contacted them on social media and blocking them if they appeared to be using a fake account:

"I've had, like, a fake account before inbox me. He told me he was in [name of a school] and he was doing RPE, like physical stuff in college. I realised my cousin's in that college so I text her and things and I was like, 'Do you know him?' and he was like, 'No, never heard of him before.' And then when I started looking through, like his name, so I typed his name on Facebook there was another account and I was like 'Whoa, he's fake'. When I inboxed him to say 'I know you're a fake account' he blocked me..."

Young person

However, while girls did not enjoy being subject to the range of abuses described, and they could resist to varying extents, fear of adverse consequences from threats to isolate them from the social group, exhaustion brought about by fending off the harassment or humiliation or the desire for validation or acceptance meant that some resigned themselves to relationships that were abusive, to sending images and to submitting to sexual activity:

"So I just think that attention from a male, even if its negative attention can sometimes be better than no attention at all. I think that's a massive factor."

External professional

"I don't think [the girls] think it's the right thing to do, they know nothing good is going to come of it. But they do get something from it in that they think that person is going to be interested in them, and that means they are going to be nice to them and say that they can be friends."

NSPCC practitioner

Although some of the children and young people who experienced assault, harassment and exploitation felt that all children and young people were subject to these experiences, they also mentioned that it was mainly children and young people in the popular group that experienced these things. The lives of children and young people described as popular were contrasted with those said to be 'quiet', 'geeky' or 'loners'. Quiet people were said to have had a small number of friends, a better quality of family life, were safer, were not sexually active and were not sending naked images. 'Loners' – children and young people who were described as being isolated with few friends – were felt to be less likely to be sending images or getting assaulted, because they were not actively seeking validation from

others. It should be pointed out that this system of classifying children and young people, explained by children and young people, was recognised by some NSPCC practitioners but not all. Some NSPCC practitioners said that in their experience they had not come across the distinction between the ‘popular’ group and ‘loners’ and would not choose to describe the children and young people or the social dynamics of the school in this way.

Boys being sexually harassed by girls

The focus of the interviews in this evaluation were often directed towards girls’ experiences of being abused by male peers. However, in one case an NSPCC practitioner mentioned working with boys who had talked about being harassed by girls for sex and by girls who talked about harassing boys for their sexual attractiveness, by labelling them with terms like ‘fit’.

Bullying

Some children and young people attending group work were known to have been bullied or reported being bullied at the time they attended the group work – sometimes this was done online on publically viewable social media spaces.

Children and young people’s labelling of their abusive experiences

Some NSPCC practitioners reported that children and young people did not use the term ‘child sexual exploitation’ in their everyday lives. In one case, a young person described exploitation as being forced into sexual activity by boys who had developed an intimate relationship with them over social media. One could argue that she had actually described sexual assault, rather than exploitation, but there was clearly an exploitative element to the assault, which she had picked up on.

None of the children and young people interviewed felt they were more vulnerable to exploitation than others, although some felt children and young people were vulnerable as a group. Some NSPCC practitioners felt that some children and young people could not acknowledge their vulnerability, because they needed to remain in denial about the dangers they faced. NSPCC practitioners felt that children and young people remained in denial to protect themselves from the level of fear that they would experience if they were to acknowledge the dangers posed to them:

“Whether they fully understand or appreciate or agree that they feel like they are [vulnerable] I don't know. I don't think so, because they have to have a bit of a guard, a bit of a survival.”

NSPCC practitioner

Children and young people were sometimes ambivalent about whether they had been subject to abusive experiences. One young person was ambivalent about whether she and other girls were actually forced into experiences of sexual assault:

“The girls aren't really forced, they just make you do it, and you say 'I don't want to, I don't want to', but then they make you do it.”

Young person

Similarly, another young person, who described being bullied at school, demonstrated a reluctance to label her experience as bullying:

“I don't know if I'm being bullied now. I don't want to admit that I'm being bullied.”

Young person

NSPCC practitioners and external professionals said that boys were unaware of their own vulnerability because they were unaware of the possibility that males could be sexually exploited or sexually abused. A number of practitioners reported that some children and young people thought that sexual exploitation was something that could not happen to them.

Grooming, exploiting and being in gangs

In some cases, boys were said by NSPCC practitioners to be operating in 'gangs'. The motivation for joining gangs came from the fact that some children and young people spent a large part of their life out of the family home, which in itself could be the result of wanting to avoid family members in the home or because there was a custom that at a certain age young men spent their time together on the street. Spending time on the street, in areas that were regularly patrolled by children and young people belonging to other gangs, meant that children and young people faced the threat of abuse from the members of other gangs. NSPCC practitioners spoke of how in the groups they ran, young boys had explained how the threat of abuse could be lowered if they joined a gang. An NSPCC practitioner reported how this same set of factors had motivated some children and young people to carry knives with them when they left the house. However, in

some cases the activity of gang members went beyond taking measures to keep themselves safe on the street and involved working to sexually exploit girls.

Family life

NSPCC practitioners and children and young people explained how some of the children and young people who attended the group work had stressful family lives. Relationships with carers and other family members were strained. Children and young people reported feeling isolated and uncared for at home, not being on talking terms with carers, having arguments, being labelled with pejorative terms like ‘bitch’, typecast as having an attitude and having pets removed from the house as a form of punishment. Some carers were said by children and young people to be not coping with life and work, were involved in criminal activity and felt to require support. Family life was also made stressful by people in the neighbourhood harassing family members. Experience of a stressful family life was for some children and young people a continuation of a long-term history of conflict, neglect and violence in the home. Some had witnessed physical violence or verbal conflict between carers or had been subject to physical violence, emotional abuse or sexual abuse from carers or family members. Some children and young people had relatives who had been sexually exploited. Some had experienced separation of birth parents and antagonistic relationships between both separated carers and their relatives, with a number being in a position of having to choose which carer to live with, which sometimes meant being shunned by family members of the carer they did not choose. Some were coming to terms with the arrival of new carers in the household and managing relationships with carers who had recently left prison. Some children and young people were suffering bereavement and others were contending with relatives being ill.

Mobile phone technology and social media applications

Mobile phone technology and social media applications played a role in peer group relationships, and were used in the humiliation, harassment, bullying, exploitation and assaults explained earlier. Some children and young people described how they constantly checked their phone for messages, including overnight, found it difficult to put their phone down and felt relieved when phone usage was banned or the phone was taken off them. NSPCC practitioners reported that, in their experience, many children and young people were addicted to using their mobile phones. Constant use of the phone allowed peers to be in constant contact. One young person said they would wake up at night, i.e. they would allow the phone to interrupt their sleep, to answer somebody in the middle of the night. In the opinion of one NSPCC practitioner, social media was creating an

environment in which children and young people were becoming increasingly desirous of receiving constant validation. In this way, the practitioner felt that children and young people were turning to social media if they were having a bad day, and that in this state, they were more vulnerable to being groomed and exploited. It was also felt by NSPCC practitioners and children and young people that social media applications were encouraging impulsive and sometimes aggressive behaviours. In other words, it created an environment in which children and young people were more likely to send a naked image, and in so doing created a good environment for people who want to obtain a naked image. The point was made that children and young people could not disconnect from the social media applications through which they got bullied, because to do so would isolate them from their peer group.

Sending naked images and sexualised presentation online

Some children and young people accessing group work were part of a wider group of children and young people in the school who created, sent and received naked images. The proportion of children and young people sending images within schools was felt by NSPCC practitioners to vary across schools, although no one was able to quantify the variation or explain it. One young person who was interviewed said that, within her secondary school, children and young people were sending images from the age of 11. In some school groups, NSPCC practitioners and external professionals explained that children and young people experienced requests for and sending naked images as a normal part of life as a child at school. Sending naked images was something that some young girls described as normal, fun, flattering and as something they did without compulsion although they only did it when requested. Furthermore, in some groups, children and young people commonly described being requested for images or having received images from people they knew, or from people whose identity was concealed or who they appeared not to know. In one group, several members had been contacted by the same individual who had sent pornographic images and images of people sustaining physical injuries, followed by a request to meet the young person.

Children and young people and NSPCC practitioners explained that, while boys sent images without being requested for them, girls only sent images in response to a request. Some girls were said to be only sending images to boyfriends, boys they had had sexual relations with or boys they already knew. Images were sent to peers and sometimes to adults. One young person said that she drew a line at sending videos, which she felt was more akin to pornography, and therefore unacceptable. In some cases, it was felt that children and young people

were sending images under duress. It was suggested that by the age of 11 all girls would have felt pressure to send a naked image:

“From Year 7 [age 11] it’s expected of you that you share nude photos with your peers.”

NSPCC practitioner

NSPCC practitioners said that some children and young people did not consider the possible adverse consequences of sending an image. Some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to have trusted that nothing bad would come of it because they could trust the person they had sent the image to. Some of the children and young people who were interviewed said they were not concerned about the illegality of the activity because they felt there was little chance of the activity being detected or of charges being brought if it was detected:

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

Young person

“I don’t think sexting is the word that’s used anymore, I think they use a different phrase, but ultimately for children and young people it’s just normal, it’s just something you do, and the legal side of it just doesn’t enter their heads. And personally I sometimes question how useful it is to say to people, ‘This is illegal, this is illegal’, because I’m not sure telling people something’s illegal stops someone from doing it. It might stop some but many people just, ‘Yeah, yeah’, don’t even think about law and legislation at the point of doing something.”

NSPCC practitioner

The prospect of having their phone confiscated as a punishment for sending naked images deterred some children and young people from sharing naked images.

Photos sent by girls elicited a sexualised response from boys, sometimes through the use of emojis⁵. In this way, the sending of the image formed part of an ongoing sexualised discussion. Some children and young people reported that the images they sent were kept private by the recipient and sometimes deleted by the social media application used to send the image. However, NSPCC practitioners and children and young people also reported that images were sometimes shared

5 One young person explained that ‘tongue’ emojis referred to astonishment and oral sex, while ‘raindrop’ emojis referred to ejaculation.

without the sender's consent. One young person explained that, in some cases, sharing a girl's naked photograph was something that a boy sometimes did to signify the end of their boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. She explained that when an image was shared the person sending the image would be said by other children and young people to have been 'exposed'. Being exposed could trigger a process whereby other boys requested an image or sexual favours from the girl who had been exposed. It could also prompt ridicule from other girls.

Young girls received unsolicited nude or sexualised images from boys. Some were said by NSPCC practitioners to have felt 'disgusted' at having received such an image. NSPCC practitioners said that young girls sometimes shared images of boys. When they did, it was said to be a source of amusement among girls, but it did not lead to girls harassing boys for more images or sex.

The physical co-location of children and young people within a school seemed to be a factor that increased the likelihood of naked images being sent. It was noted by NSPCC practitioners that requests for images from Year 9 girls by Year 11 boys dropped off when Year 11 boys left the school.

Where girls were known to have sent images in some schools, referrals were sent to Children's Services. However, NSPCC practitioners explained that Children's Services were said by NSPCC practitioners to have not viewed the sending of naked images as an issue they needed to involve themselves with. This was partly because Children's Services could not respond to all child protection concerns, and saw other types of concern, such as abuse by a stranger, as more important than peer-to-peer abuse:

"These are not priorities for Children's Services, unfortunately. And I know and I completely get the argument around CSE and whatever, but, unfortunately, the thinking, I think, around CSE at the moment is that strangers are lying and making people do things. When it's peer-to-peer and the boys are also sending photos of themselves to girls, I think they take it less seriously. And I think for us, as NSPCC, obviously I think our thresholds are a lot lower than Children's Services, so I think we get a lot more concerned than Children's Services do... I think it's the high-end stuff. It's the girls that are going missing, it's the children and

young people who are being given drugs by people, or speaking online to randomers and going to meet them and stuff like that... So although school obviously have to pass their concerns on, it seems largely down to them to be getting other agencies involved and trying to sort it out from there really.”

NSPCC practitioner

Although boys were sometimes talked about as the people who requested images, in certain cases boys could also find themselves being subject to request for images of themselves. One NSPCC practitioner explained how boys, whose personal details including where they lived were available for anyone to view, regularly experienced requests for images of themselves from people who they did not know, who appeared to be girls of their own age:

“They were all saying, ‘the minute I go on certain sites or certain chat rooms’, one of them was saying ‘within 20 minutes, I was asked for a picture by a girl’, who he assumed was a girl of peer age, he didn’t send the image and thought it was too soon to do that but they were all saying it was being requested of them, yes.”

NSPCC practitioner

In some cases, the boys had found that the girl who appeared to be requesting an image was actually a male who then shared the image of the boy with the peer group. NSPCC practitioners explained that some boys reported people making requests for images, not being able to say no, but instead sending images of other people they had found on the Internet instead.

The sending of naked images was felt by some NSPCC practitioners to be part of a wider project that children and young people were engaged in, to present themselves in a sexualised way. This could manifest in them using sexualised photographs for their profile picture on social media accounts. The images were described as being sexually suggestive, showing the child or young person semi-naked and posing in bikinis. It was felt that the sexualised presentation of children and young people online was itself influenced by a wider cultural shift in the way that adults and celebrities in particular were presenting themselves in a sexualised way:

“I think, actually it’s a very difficult time for teenagers. When I have discussed it with teenagers, being a teenager and actually every magazine that you see, a young person’s magazine, there’s somebody glamorous with a fantastic body and half dressed, and that’s their idol, that’s who they look up to, and actually everything in the media, and I’ll use the Kardashians for an example, because this came up in a presentation once. Every picture that Kim Kardashian, not every, but a high volume of them, she is naked or she’s very, she’s dressed in very limited clothing, and it doesn’t seem like it’s a big issue. So, if this is on the TV, and in magazines and in music videos, it’s almost like it’s not a big issue anymore.”

Safeguarding officer for a school

Alcohol and drugs

Some children and young people reported consumption of alcohol and drugs, including very heavy consumption of alcohol, such as two bottles of vodka in one sitting. Sometimes, the alcohol was consumed in the presence of and with the consent of carers. One young person described how consumption of alcohol and drugs was used as a way of coping with anxiety caused by previous experiences of abuse and violence and a dysfunctional family life. Another young person described how, in social situations, boys waited until girls got drunk or provided drinks and drugs to facilitate girls reaching a point of intoxication, because it lowered the girls’ resistance to attempts at sexual assault and harassment. Children and young people also described how, at parties and social gatherings, incidents of public shaming, humiliation and sexual assault were experienced during and after periods of intoxication.

Unsupervised spaces

Children and young people described situations and circumstances in which they spent time with other children and young people away from their carers and without a supervising adult. Locations included parks, woods, rivers, friends’ homes, streets, town centres and fast food restaurants. Times included weekends, evenings and school breaks and school lesson time (when children and young people absconded together). One young person described how when children and young people absconded from school lessons, they gathered in areas known to drug dealers who would offer the children and young people the

opportunity to purchase and consume drugs. Children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to have returned to the classroom under the influence of the drugs they had consumed.

Another area in which children and young people interacted unsupervised with peers or with adults who were seeking to obtain naked images and engage in sexual interaction with them was on social media applications. This included chat rooms and dating sites for teenagers. One NSPCC practitioner explained how children and young people described how they flirted with people online, something which children and young people referred to as 'linking with'. While 'linking with' and 'flirting', children and young people received video messages from naked men, pornographic images and child sexual abuse images. NSPCC practitioners also explained how children and young people had described to them how they had been given links to access the 'dark web' where they had access to physically abusive videos and images. Where boys were engaged with sharing, one NSPCC practitioner felt it was down to a combination of being socially isolated and naïve, not understanding the potential consequences of linking with people online.

It was pointed out that some children and young people were putting their personal details online, without having any awareness of the risks that might be posed to them as a result:

"There was a girl who just has no idea about how to protect herself online whatsoever and just would put anything and everything out there online, no understanding of privacy or the reason for privacy."

NSPCC practitioner

Pornography

NSPCC practitioners reported that some of the children and young people selected for the group work had been said by school staff – and had sometimes acknowledged themselves – that they had seen pornography and in some cases were addicted to watching it. Children and young people had reported sharing videos and finding it amusing. However, they had also reported that there was so much material being shared among peer groups that they could not avoid it. In some cases, children and young people had wanted help to manage their consumption of pornographic material.

Wellbeing

NSPCC practitioners and children and young people had described how some had struggled with feelings of depression and anxiety, and some self-harmed. Sometimes, this was understood by children and young people to be a result of their experience of a stressful family life. Symptoms of anxiety impacted on the ability to function in a mainstream school. In one case, a decision was made for a young person to be moved to a smaller school, with smaller class sizes. One young person who had described being sexually assaulted and sexually abused by other children and young people said she felt quite lonely and did not have anyone to help them process their feelings:

"I always listen, but no one helps me. I don't have anyone to talk to. Other people tell me that they don't know how I'm so strong and always smiling. I don't know how I do it. The thing is I am either really up or really down. A lot of teachers say I have depression. I'm fine, I can cope. I'm so used to being let down. I think 'fine'."

Young person

Some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners and children and young people not to have close relationships with any adults, either in the family home or school. In school, it was said that children and young people had different teachers for different subjects, so no one particular member of staff knew the young person well. Some children and young people reported not enjoying school. One young person explained that she had found it difficult to concentrate in school lessons, partly because she had been put in a classroom with children and young people whose behaviour was disruptive, diminishing her ability to focus. She added that she had been the victim of name calling and hostility from other children and young people. Some children and young people would truant from school; others had been excluded. Some children and young people felt pressure from their parents and school to do well in exams and get a good job, and to be able to show they had a nice car, lived in a nice area and had designer clothes.

Some children and young people struggled to trust others; one explained this was because she could not trust her own family members. However, some of the children and young people who were described as finding it difficult to trust people, were said by NSPCC practitioners to have one or more relationships with adults where there was a strong bond of trust, whether with a teacher or a close friend.

While children and young people experienced stress in their family life and at school, they could also, at the same time, find school and family life a source of entertainment and enjoyment. Sources of enjoyment included sport, music and drama, visiting friends' houses and having sleepovers, going shopping or on holiday and having pets. Children and young people also strove to achieve despite the problems they faced; some received private tuition with the intention of passing exams in the future. Extra-curricular activities were sometimes felt to be symptomatic of children and young people not wanting to be at home.

Experience, knowledge and attitudes

Experience of sex

Experience of sex varied. Some children and young people were said by NSPCC practitioners to be sexually active from the age of 12. Some children and young people were reported by NSPCC practitioners to have had sexual relationships with several different people – sometimes several sexual partners over the course of a month. Boys who had sex with girls were said by NSPCC practitioners not to carry condoms and would only wear one if the girl they were having sex with brought one along. Sex was said to be considered by some children and young people as a 'fun' activity – some children and young people were not put off by the knowledge that it was illegal.

Knowledge of sex, consent and sexual abuse and exploitation

Knowledge about sex, consent, sexual abuse and exploitation varied. Some children and young people were felt to have already had a good understanding prior to the group work starting, having previously received group work on sex education and exploitation, or having been educated by parents. However, other children and young people were felt to have had a poor understanding of how sex worked generally. Furthermore, some children and young people who accessed group work had no understanding of what consent meant. Part of the reason for why children and young people had a poor understanding of sex and consent was that in some schools children and young people did not receive sex education until they had reached Year 9, aged 13. One NSPCC practitioner reported that, in some schools, a decision had been made to replace PSHE lessons with a drop-in clinic:

“You still get stuff, believe it or not, 15-year-olds can only get pregnant standing up, and you just think, but you do, you get this, you still, and you think this is meant to be better, I remember that from when I was at school and that’s 30 years ago or more than 30 years ago, and yet here we are 30 years on and people are still wondering that. So, for me that’s a failure of education in some way, shape or form.”

NSPCC practitioner

NSPCC practitioners said that some children and young people had only ever discussed the topic of sex with other children and young people and had never discussed it with an adult. Children and young people explained that some parents and school staff were unable or unwilling to talk about sexual matters. Some schools provided information on sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, but would not broach the emotional component of sexual relationships. Some children and young people had knowledge of how heterosexual sex worked but did not understand how homosexual or lesbian sex worked. It was pointed out by one NSPCC practitioner that, generally speaking, children and young people lacked the opportunity to talk with adults about sexuality and emotions related to sex.

One NSPCC practitioner reported how boys had described experiencing a pressure not to talk about their feelings about relationships and sex. NSPCC practitioners explained how some children and young people were not aware that boys could be abused, or that abuse could be perpetrated by someone on someone that they knew. Some children and young people thought that reporting an incident of abuse would go on their police record. Some children and young people misunderstood the law around creating, sending and receiving naked images of children and young people, believing it was legal to do so as long as all the parties involved were 16 or over. To the extent that boys understood and considered the concept of exploitation, in some groups, they saw it as something that was done by males to females.

Attitudes towards women

NSPCC practitioners reported that some of the boys selected for group work were felt by school staff and NSPCC practitioners to have had poor attitudes towards girls and women. In some cases, boys who spent time on the street in gangs explained that boys in gangs both exerted but also experienced a pressure to have a girlfriend. Young boys also explained that if they did not ask girls for naked images they would be considered weird by their peer group. NSPCC practitioners also reported that children and young people had described how they experienced a pressure to be seen to be sexually active with girls.

It was felt that boys' attitudes towards girls and women had been influenced by their consumption of pornography:

"I think because it comes up and we're just fairly conscious that it's just really something that kids, boys, access a lot of, and schools will tell us that some of the stuff that boys are coming out with, like why's her breasts gone all flat when she lies down? Because they're not implants. Seriously, kids who thought there was something wrong with a girl's breasts because they didn't stand upright when she was lying down, and because what he'd seen as silicone implants on pornography and they don't move and he thought that's what was natural.

NSPCC practitioner

NSPCC practitioners also reported that girls' attitudes towards other girls were felt to be poor. Where girls had been raped, sexually assaulted or harassed, some girls could blame the girl for allowing herself to be in a situation where the abuse took place.

Safeguarding

Children and young people who had had experience of sexual exploitation, sexual abuse or other forms of abuse reported having made changes to the types of thing they did, prior to attending group work, to lower the likelihood of being subject to abuse in the future. Two children and young people reported withdrawing from the large 'popular' social groups described earlier and instead fostered a smaller friendship group. In both cases, the children and young people disparaged members of large social groupings that they pulled out of. One young person called people in the group 'fake'. This suggests that disparagement might be a coping mechanism for the loss of social contact that they had experienced.

Some children and young people, having experienced humiliation at the hands of their peer group following a naked image having been shared, reported having increased resolve to reject further requests for naked images. One young person explained how rejecting such requests also required that she be able to respond calmly to the threats made to her after she rejected the request. Children and young people explained how their responses to requests for naked images could sometimes involve an element of aggression.

Children and young people also described re-evaluating their relationship with alcohol and changing the amount of alcohol they consumed after incidents where they had been humiliated or assaulted following intoxication.

Some children and young people stopped using social media to reassess their relationship with people through social media, in the light of personal experiences of being humiliated through the use of social media applications.

Sometimes, parents and professionals took action to increase the safety of children. Phones were removed from children and young people by parents permanently and by schools in school time, to prevent the sending of nude images and bullying. Some children and young people, aware of the stresses of their family life, placed emphasis on how important it was for them to protect their younger siblings from family members and possible harm.

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