



Give them knowledge and hope, not fear

Guidance for delivering education to children and young people on child exploitation, county lines and related crime.

**The
Children's
Society**



"A police officer should be sympathetic, and understanding, and offer support, and reassurance that they are not to blame."

Young person

The Prevention programme

The Children's Society's national Prevention programme was established in 2019 and is commissioned by the Home Office. The programme works to drive improvements in the prevention and disruption of child sexual abuse (CSA) and exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), and modern slavery on a regional and national basis across England and Wales. With expertise on the lived experiences of children, current and emerging forms of child exploitation, and effective approaches to improving victim identification and support, the programme has built a reputable profile recognised across law enforcement, child protection, healthcare, and the private sector.

Why we wrote this guide

Although police forces across England and Wales routinely deliver education sessions to children and young people on crime, exploitation, and abuse, there is currently no Authorised Professional Practice (APP) or national policing guidance that sets consistent standards for this work. The only national resource available is the Police Education (PolEd) programme, which provides lesson materials for schools, but is designed primarily for teachers rather than as formal national guidance for policed educational delivery.

Given this, The Children's Society and the National County Lines Coordination Centre have developed this guide, drawing on both our professional expertise and the views of children and young people themselves.

The guide seeks to support policing to deliver consistent, high quality education sessions to young people. Key to this is ensuring that the approach and content prioritises young people's wellbeing and helps them know where to get help.

Who it is aimed at

This guide is aimed at all police officers and staff that are involved in developing and/or delivering content for and to young people about exploitation and related crime, including county lines and serious youth violence.

Building relationships

Strong, trusting relationships are foundational to effective police engagement with young people. Positive relationships create safety, increase the likelihood of disclosure, and improve the impact of any intervention.

The Children's Society published a guide to building positive relationships with children and young people in June 2025. This resource can be accessed [here](#).



Recommended practice

- The police staff responsible for delivering educational content should maintain a regular, visible presence in school rather than only doing so following incidents requiring police intervention or formal sessions. Consistency supports familiarity, reduces fear and builds trust.
- Prioritise getting to know the young people you work with and take a genuine interest in the things they are into. Enable them to get to know you too (in a boundaried and professional way). Authentic connection strengthens engagement and helps you to pick up on risks and behaviour that is out of the ordinary, while also enabling a young person to feel safe in talking to you if they need to.
- Be mindful of and sensitive to the ways in which previous interactions with police may impact young people's readiness to engage with you, and how trauma may present in their responses and behaviour, including anger and aggression.
- Gradual, relationship-based approaches to educating young people can help them understand the realities of exploitation and the tactics of criminals and perpetrators, grounded in safety rather than fear. This can be achieved by:
 - being open to discussions and opportunities to educate and inform outside of structured sessions
 - using ice breaker activities to include an element of play and fun in between the serious topics you are there to discuss, and to increase engagement
 - spreading content over multiple sessions or days
 - prioritising discussing and enhancing young people's ability to recognise healthy relationships. Focusing on what 'good' looks like and fostering young people's confidence and assertiveness to identify and expect this can be just as impactful, if not more so than teaching them about risks and what to avoid.

- There should be careful consideration of who is best placed to deliver content on exploitation and related crime to the specific young people in question. This may not be the police. Where it is the police, however, officers delivering it should have:
 - received exploitation-specific training
 - received training on trauma and its impact
 - an awareness of **appropriate language** in this context, and the importance of avoiding and challenging victim blaming language and practice, including when educating young people
 - experience working directly with children and young people, and the relational skills needed to communicate effectively
 - the right training to manage exploitation and abuse-related disclosures
 - an understanding of relevant local support services and pathways which young people can access where needed.

"They only talk about knife crime in school ... and say don't stab people. They tell us stuff we already know."

Young person

Scaffolding around delivery

Effective delivery requires well-planned support structures before, during, and after any session. Even the best education will have a limited impact and risks being actively harmful if delivered in silo, or without a 'whole school approach' where school staff are also upskilled and able to support young people effectively. Police must work in partnership with schools to ensure that effective support is in place and that safeguarding remains central to any education input.

Before delivery

- Consider communicating with parents or carers ahead of the session to let them know it is taking place, that their child may have questions afterwards, and signpost them to information to aid these conversations and their own learning (alongside contact details for relevant support services, such as Childline and SafeCall for young people and the Iverson Trust for parents and carers).
- Consider whether you need to wear uniform when delivering as just seeing the uniform can act as a barrier for some young people.
- Consider providing school staff, including teachers and pastoral leads, with an overview of the session content, or where possible deliver preparatory training to them to ensure they are able to appropriately respond to any questions, disclosures, or issues raised by young people after the session.
- Agree roles during the session with teachers and pastoral leads well in advance, including who will handle disclosures, how staff will check in on young people, and what immediate support is available.

Prepare young people by:

- outlining content themes and helping them know what to expect
- providing 'trigger warnings' regarding the content that you will cover and ensuring that young people can step out of the session if needed
- reminding them there will be set breaks and clearly outline what time these breaks will happen.

Set some ground rules with the group.

This could include:

- encouraging young people to be respectful and to listen to each other's point of view
- reminding young people that what's discussed in the room stays in the room.

Remind young people about confidentiality, and how you might need to break this if you are worried about their or someone else's safety. Also reassure them that you would talk to them first before doing so.

This might sound like:

- "What we discuss in this room is confidential, but if you tell us something that makes us worried about you or another young person, we would need to make sure everyone is safe by following this up. If we needed to take anything outside of this room, we will always tell you first."

"I wasn't told they were coming, just you know, you get there and ... woah."

Young person

During delivery

Ensure clear signposting within the content. Helping young people understand where they can go to get help is one of the most important things you can provide.

- Explain where they can go and who they can speak to if they are impacted by the content, or need further advice and support. This should include a point of contact within the school, as well as independent and confidential options such as **Childline** and **National Child Criminal Exploitation Support Service**.
- Explain what actions the police will take to safeguard young people experiencing exploitation and that you will not blame them for this.

Don't focus on or become distracted by how young people present or behave, and instead make space for them to express what they think and how they feel.

They might giggle, appear to be uninterested or bored, or act in a way you feel is disruptive. This might be because they are nervous, unsure what to expect or may be finding the content difficult. Calmly move the conversation on where needed or redirect the young person's energy by positively engaging with them, for example by asking for their views and then taking these seriously.

Some young people may use victim blaming language towards each other or about others. Be prepared for this and think about how you can gently challenge without disengaging young people.

Some phrases you could use include:

- "I can see your point of view, and at the same time I feel ..."
- "That's an interesting point, I wonder what others in the room think about ..."

Consider that young people are experts in their own lives and often know more about the topics you are there to educate them on than you think. Avoid talking down to them and create spaces where young people can educate and inform each other. Guided group discussions and reflections can sometimes be more powerful than a professional or 'expert' delivering a message.

"Not every child will be able to sit and listen to a presentation, particularly if there are no videos or pictures."

Young person

After delivery

Provide:

- one-to-one sessions for any young people who need them
- information on where young people can go for to get help for themselves or others
- a pathway for parents or carers to be informed or involved where appropriate.

Invite feedback:

Encourage young people to share what they liked and didn't like about the session, either through fun activities or surveys, and adapt your future content based on what they tell you. This will lead to better quality and more engaging sessions.



Content and delivery

Content must be trauma aware, accessible, and rooted in the lived realities of young people. However, it is important to avoid 'performative' use of lived experience, and you should never expect victims and survivors to visit schools and share their experiences of exploitation and abuse as part of your session. The views and experiences of survivors are central to tackling these issues, but must be engaged with respectfully and not as a way to make your session more engaging.

Start with a content warning. Consider how content may impact young people. You will not know the full extent of young people's lived experience, so be aware of how conversations around exploitation may be upsetting or unsettling for them. Evidence tells us that exposing young people to shocking or distressing messaging and imagery relating to crime and abuse may not only be ineffective, but actively harmful and counterproductive.

Do not use 'shock tactics' or show distressing images or films.

This includes:

- 'Trap houses' or 'drug dens'.
- Drug paraphernalia.
- Crime scene images or footage.
- Police and immigration raids.
- Explicit violence or images of weapons, including knives.
- Scenes of sexual abuse.

"In primary and secondary schools we would have an assembly ... about the dangers in online spaces, we would be shown scary videos but they sometimes had the opposite effect."

Young person

Avoid victim blaming language and messages.

- Move away from messages framed as making better or safer choices.
- Reflect the realities of coercion and manipulation, and the ways these can be used by perpetrators to convince victims that exploitation and abuse is their fault or something they have chosen.
- Avoid fear based messaging which 'warns' young people of consequences. Doing so actively discourages young people from telling someone about their experiences and getting help.
- Make clear that a child should never be blamed for their abuse.

"If someone's going through it (exploitation) don't make them feel like they're in the wrong, like in the video the boy seemed like he was in the wrong, if you were being exploited this would stop you telling anyone."

Young person

Ensure the pace and structure of the session is accessible and engaging.

This includes:

- making time for regular short breaks and 'check in' points
- **making sure all resources used are accessible for neurodivergent participants (for example, providing different colour and font options)**
- creating activities where young people can move around the room.
- Consider that young people are experts in their own lives and often know more about the topics you are there to educate them on than you think. Avoid talking down to them and create spaces where young people can educate and inform each other. Guided group discussions and reflections can sometimes be more powerful than a professional or 'expert' delivering a message.

Engaging, relevant delivery

- Use immersive, story-based, relatable formats.
- Avoid overuse of slang terms. This prevents the content from dating quickly.
- Ensure that content is relevant to and appropriate for the demographic you are presenting to (i.e. that it reflects their local area, accents and ages where possible).
- Ensure the content is up to date and informed by the latest insights, as child exploitation and associated crime is always changing. Do not just stick to tried and tested materials.

Considering the individual needs of young people

Young people view and experience risk, policing, and safeguarding actions differently depending on their background, neurotype, race, gender, lived experience and other aspects of identity. It is important to speak to the school or host organisation about the group you will be delivering to ahead of time in order to tailor your content and approach as much as possible.

Neurodiversity

- Plan for sensory needs and processing differences. Adjust the pace of delivery, and consider there may be a need for additional support after the session.

Lived experience of exploitation, abuse, and being a victim of crime

- You may be delivering to young people who have lived experience relevant to the content you are delivering. These young people will be experts by experience, but should never be expected to share these experiences during the session
- Be prepared for potential disclosures and ensure that enhanced safeguarding support is available, with relevant staff on hand after the session.

"Young people know the secrets of the areas they live, so police shouldn't act like they know more than us." **Young person**

Previous interactions with police

- Recognise that some young people may have fears, mistrust, or negative associations with the police, and this might impact how comfortable they are engaging with you. It takes five positive interactions with professionals to offset 1 bad one, and communities can carry trauma from past experiences even when a young person hasn't experienced this directly. Be mindful of this and consider how your input can be positive, meaningful, and an opportunity to model what policing can be at its best.

"The child's background is important - their experiences of police matters. Police officers need to explain who they are, what they are there for, what they are going to be talking about. A lot of young people have trauma related to the police." **Young person**

Different settings and contexts

- Ensure you deliver content to young people across a range of education settings to reach a larger and more diverse audience. This includes hospital schools, pupil referral units, and those who are home schooled.

Community dynamics

- Recognise the ways in which broader social contexts impact young people's readiness to engage with police, and therefore the session you are there to deliver. Consider the following:
 - What are relationships like between police and the community in which you are delivering?
 - What ideas might young people already have about police, even before you interact with them?
 - What can you do as an individual to build trust and create safety for young people?
 - Could you run a short follow-up session or drop in to reinforce the messages you have delivered and build relationships and trust?

"It's hard for me to communicate with the police because of my understanding of how they behave. We're taught they're trying to 'get us'. They're trying to imprison us, not help us."

Young person

Key messaging

Always consider the key messages and takeaways that you want young people to leave your session with. Your audience is only likely to retain a small fraction of the content that you have covered, so make sure you focus where it matters and conclude your session by reiterating these key messages.

We strongly recommend that police prioritise the following as the key messages and focus of their sessions:

- How to recognise signs of grooming and exploitation.
- Exploitation and abuse is never a child's fault.
- What healthy relationships look like.
- Where young people can go to get help.

"Tell us who we can be, not who we should be."

Young person

References:

[Child Exploitation Language Guide](#) | The Children's Society

[Guide to making information accessible for neurodivergent people](#) | Leeds Autism AIM

[You need 5 good interactions to offset every bad interaction](#) | Social Work News

[Building positive relationships with children and young people](#) | Flipsnack, The Children's Society

"Every child -
no matter what
age - should
have someone."

Louise

**Our teen years should be a time to grow, explore,
and build confidence to face the future.**

But across the UK, young people's wellbeing is in crisis. Teens in Britain are the unhappiest in Europe, with too many face overwhelming pressures on their mental health, as well as challenges like abuse and exploitation. Too often, help is only offered at crisis point.

The Children's Society meets teenagers where they are, providing early, tailored support through drop-in services that have no referrals or waiting lists. We also hold the government to account, pushing for policies that protect the next generation.

**A future of hope and happiness belongs to every teen.
Together, we're can make sure no teen faces life alone.**

**For more information about this resource or the wider
work of The Children's Society's national Prevention
Programme email Prevention@childrenssociety.org.uk.**

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