YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDANCE

CCE

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

SBNI
Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland



Sometimes adults or older young people trick, pressure or manipulate children and young people into doing things that are crimes. They might offer money, gifts, friendship, protection or a sense of belonging. They might also use threats, fear or violence to stay in control.

This is called Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). It is a form of child abuse, and it is never your fault.

CCE can happen to anyone. It doesn't matter who you are, where you live, or what your background is. It can happen in person or online, and it often starts with something that seems small or harmless before becoming more serious.

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) has produced guidance for professionals, such as teachers, social workers, youth workers and the police, to help them understand, recognise and respond to Child Criminal Exploitation. This guide is based on that, but has been written especially for young people.

It focuses on the things that are most important for you to know:

- **what Child Criminal Exploitation is;**
- **why some young people may be targeted by exploiters;**
- **how to recognise the warning signs in yourself or someone else;**
- **what to do if you're worried; and**
- **where to get help and what happens if you tell someone.**

You are not responsible for stopping Child Criminal Exploitation. That's the job of the adults and professionals whose role is to keep children and young people safe.



If something doesn't feel right, or you're worried about yourself or someone else, tell a trusted adult. They can help make sure you or your friend gets the support and protection you need.

If you're reading this because you're worried about yourself, or because you're worried about a friend, you are not alone. There are people who will listen, support you, and help keep you safe.

What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is when someone takes advantage of a child or young person and gets them do something that is a crime, for someone else's benefit.

The person exploiting you might be an adult or an older young person. At first, they might seem friendly, helpful or someone you can trust. They may offer you money, gifts, food, lifts, somewhere to stay, or make you feel like you belong. Sometimes they make you feel like you're part of their "family" or that they are the only people who really care about you.



Later, they may start asking you to do things that are illegal. For example, they might ask you to:



carry or store drugs, money or weapons;



collect or deliver packages;



let them use your bank account;



keep something secret for them;



damage property or threaten someone;



carry out jobs for organised crime groups or paramilitary organisations;



take part in riots, public disorder or acts of violence; or

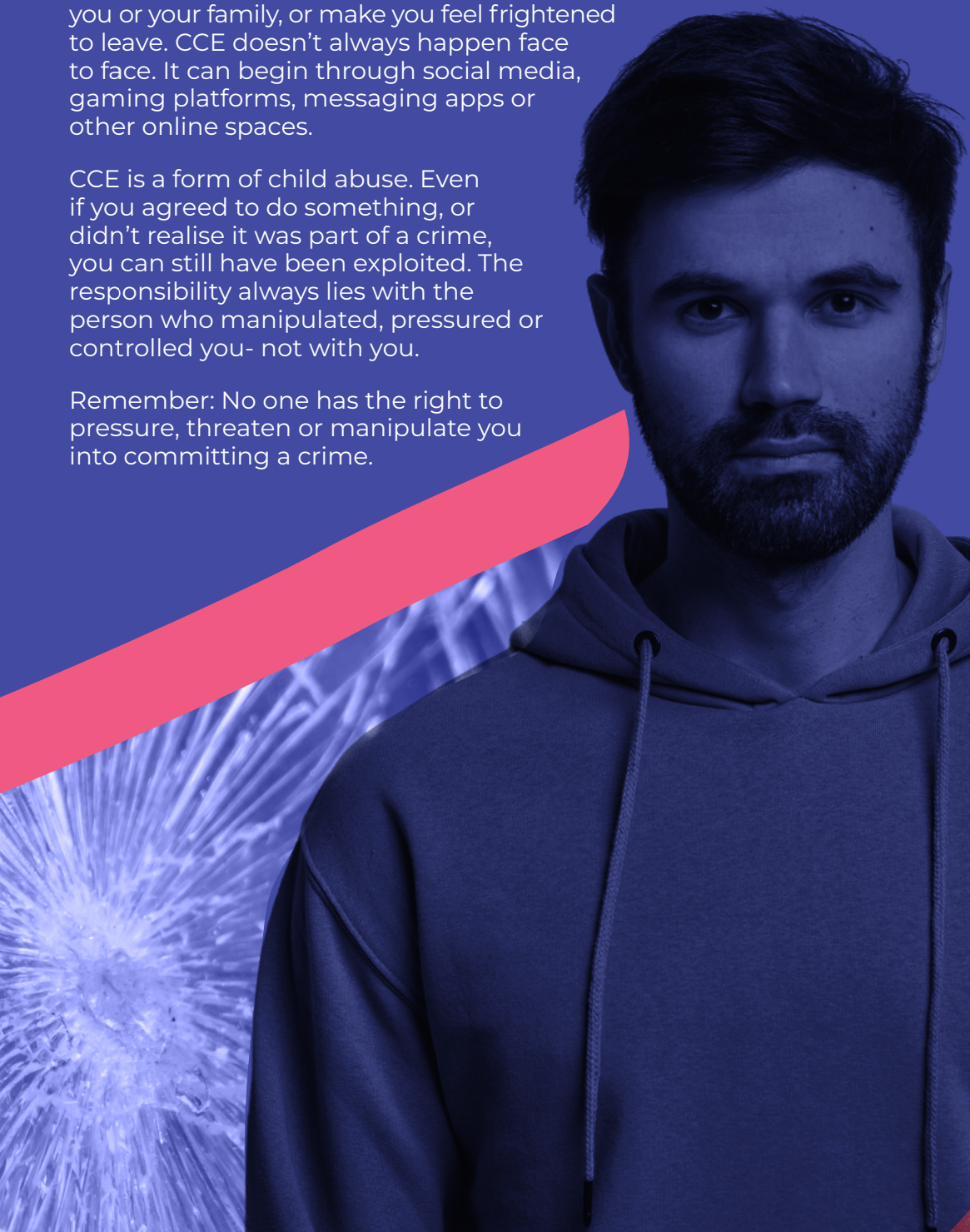


do something illegal online.

If you say no, they might make you feel guilty, tell you that you owe them something, threaten you or your family, or make you feel frightened to leave. CCE doesn't always happen face to face. It can begin through social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps or other online spaces.

CCE is a form of child abuse. Even if you agreed to do something, or didn't realise it was part of a crime, you can still have been exploited. The responsibility always lies with the person who manipulated, pressured or controlled you- not with you.

Remember: No one has the right to pressure, threaten or manipulate you into committing a crime.



How do exploiters choose who to target?

Exploiters often persuade children and young people to take the risks while they stay in the background. They don't choose children and young people because they've done something wrong. They look for opportunities to take advantage of someone who needs something or is going through a difficult time.

That doesn't mean those children and young people will be exploited. Most won't. But it does mean someone who wants to cause harm might try to take advantage of them.

An exploiter might target someone who:

- **feels lonely, isolated or wants to fit in;**
- **needs money or worries about having enough;**
- **wants friendship, attention or a sense of belonging;**
- **is having a difficult time at home, at school or with their mental health;**
- **has experienced big changes in their life, such as moving into care, moving to a new area, or losing someone close to them;**
- **has additional needs or disabilities that someone tries to take advantage of;**
- **is new to the area or country and is still learning about the people, places and support available;**
- **is LGBTQ+ and may be looking for acceptance, friendship or somewhere they feel they belong;**
- **has family members involved in crime and feels pressure to commit crimes too;**
- **doesn't always have a trusted adult they can turn to;**

- **spends a lot of time online, where it can be easier for people to hide who they really are; or**
- **is already feeling under pressure or worried about something.**

Exploiters often pretend to be kind, helpful or understanding. They may make someone feel special, offer support when they need it most, or promise to solve their problems. But their real aim is to gain trust so they can take advantage of them.

Anyone can be exploited.

Most children and young people who experience one or more of these situations are never exploited. These are not reasons to blame yourself or anyone else. They are simply situations that some may try to take advantage of.

If someone targets a child or young person, the responsibility always lies with the person doing the exploiting, no matter the reason. Adults have a responsibility to help keep children safe and to step in if they are worried that someone is being exploited.



Could it be happening to me or someone I know?

Child Criminal Exploitation can be difficult to spot. Sometimes it happens so gradually that the young person doesn't realise what is happening until they feel trapped.

None of the signs below prove that someone is being exploited. But if several of them are happening, or something just doesn't feel right, it's important to talk to a trusted adult. The sooner someone gets help, the easier it can be to keep them safe.

Something might not be right if someone...

- **suddenly has lots of money, expensive clothes, gifts or a new phone that they can't explain.**
- **is asked to keep secrets or is told not to tell anyone what's happening.**
- **starts spending lots of time with older people they don't really know.**
- **suddenly seems frightened, anxious, withdrawn or angry, especially around certain people.**
- **says they owe someone money or feels they have to "pay someone back".**



- is pressured to carry, hide or deliver something without asking questions.
- starts missing school, staying out late, disappearing for periods of time, or travelling to places they wouldn't normally go.
- receives lots of calls or messages and seems worried about answering them.
- is becoming secretive about where they are going or who they are spending time with.
- is threatened, blackmailed or made to feel guilty if they say no.
- seems cut off from friends, family or trusted adults.
- has unexplained injuries or seems scared of what might happen if they tell someone.
- is spending much more time online and is secretive about who they are talking to.
- says things like "I don't have a choice", "I owe them", or "They'll hurt me or my family."



One sign on its own doesn't automatically mean someone is being exploited. But if you are worried about yourself, a friend, a brother or sister, or someone else you know, trust your instincts and tell a trusted adult.

It's always better to talk about your worries than to keep them to yourself. Getting help early can stop someone from being exploited more.

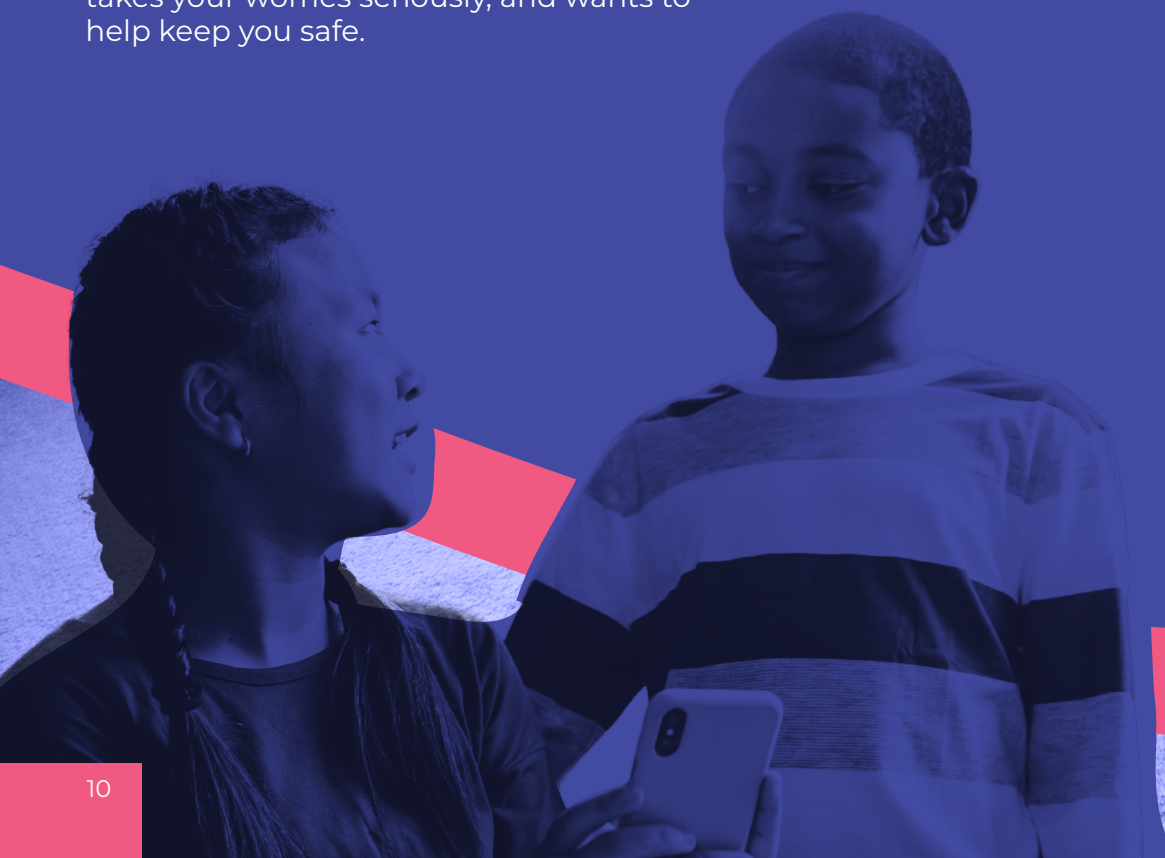
What should I do if I'm worried?

If you're worried that you, or someone you know, might be experiencing Child Criminal Exploitation, don't keep it to yourself.

It can feel scary to tell someone. You might be worried that you won't be believed, that you'll get yourself or your friend into trouble, or that things will get worse.

But remember, the most important thing is keeping children and young people safe. Talk to a trusted adult.

A trusted adult is someone who listens to you, takes your worries seriously, and wants to help keep you safe.



This could be:

- **a parent, carer or another family member;**
- **a foster carer;**
- **a social worker;**
- **a teacher or classroom assistant;**
- **a youth worker or sports coach;**
- **a school counsellor or another trusted adult in school;**
- **another adult you know and trust.**

If someone is in danger, or you don't feel able to speak to someone you know, you can also contact the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

Will I get in trouble?

Many young people worry that speaking up will get themselves or their friend into trouble.

But this is about keeping children safe, not blaming them.

Adults understand that children and young people can be manipulated, pressured or frightened into becoming involved in crime. That's why it's so important to tell someone as early as possible.

What happens if I tell someone?

The adult you speak to will listen to what you've told them and help decide what needs to happen next. They may need to share what you've told them with other professionals whose job is to help keep children safe.

They won't do this to get you or your friend into trouble. They'll do it because they are worried about your safety.

Remember – you don't have to deal with it on your own. Speaking up could help protect you, your friend, or someone else from being exploited.

MYTHS & EXAMPLES

Myth – “If I agreed to it, it can’t be exploitation.”

Reality - Exploiters often build trust before asking someone to do something illegal. They may offer friendship, money, gifts or make you feel like you belong. Even if you agreed at first, you can still have been exploited.

Jamie’s Story

Jamie (14) started spending time with some older teenagers who bought him food after football and gave him lifts home. After a while they asked him to deliver a package, saying it was “just a favour”.

Soon they wanted him to do more jobs. Jamie knew some of what he was doing was wrong, but they reminded him of everything they’d done for him, and he felt he owed them. They were paying him, and giving him gifts, so he didn’t see himself as being exploited.

Jamie wasn’t to blame. The older teenagers deliberately exploited him. Even though Jamie felt he was getting something out of it, he was still being exploited. The gifts, money and favours were part of how the older teenagers gained his trust and control.



Myth – “I’d get my friend into trouble if I told someone.”

Reality - If a child or young person is being exploited, adults want to keep them safe. Telling someone isn’t about getting your friend into trouble. It’s about helping them get support and protection.

Aisha’s Story

Aisha (17) noticed that her friend had suddenly started wearing expensive trainers and always seemed to have money, but wouldn’t say where it came from. She was getting lots of phone calls from older people and looked frightened whenever her phone rang. She had stopped spending time with her usual friends and once told Aisha, “I can’t say no.”

Aisha knew something wasn’t right. She worried that telling an adult might get her friend into trouble. Then she realised that her friend was already in trouble, and keeping quiet wasn’t going to make her safer.

Speaking up wasn’t about getting her friend into trouble- it was about helping her get to safety.



Myth – “It only happens to people involved in gangs.”

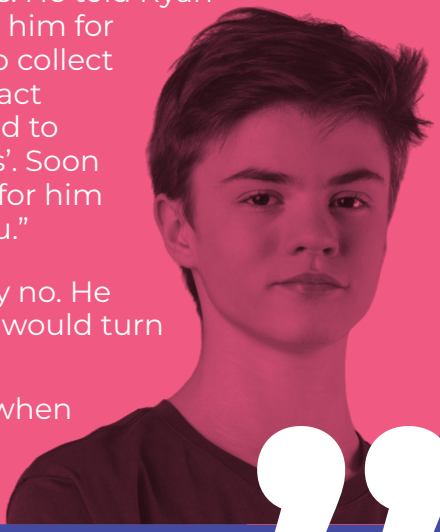
Reality - Child Criminal Exploitation can happen anywhere. It can happen online, through friends, or through people a young person already knows and trusts.

Ryan’s Story

Ryan (15) had recently moved into a children’s home and was finding it difficult to settle in. He didn’t know many people and often felt lonely.

One of the other young people introduced him to an older man who lived nearby. The man seemed friendly. They would hang out at his house most days, and the man even paid him to do odd jobs around the house. Ryan really liked it there.

After a while, the man asked Ryan to keep a bag at the children’s home for a couple of days. He told Ryan not to look inside and said he’d pay him for helping out. Later, he asked Ryan to collect money from someone, and to contact others online and tell them they had to pay up or ‘there’d be consequences’. Soon after he asked Ryan to hide a knife for him because “no one would suspect you.”



By then, Ryan was frightened to say no. He worried that if he refused, the man would turn against him.

Someone took advantage of Ryan when he needed support. That wasn’t his fault.

Myth – "Everyone's doing it. Joining in won't hurt."

Reality – Sometimes adults encourage children and young people to take part in riots, attacks on property or other public disorder. They may tell you that you're showing loyalty, protecting your community, or standing up for something important. But if they are encouraging children to commit crimes while they stay out of danger. That is exploitation.

Callum's Story

Callum (16) was sent a post from social media by his older cousin, telling young people to meet late one evening near where they lived. Older men were telling everyone to "show loyalty" and "stand up for the area." Lots of his friends said they were going too, and Callum felt like everyone expected him to be there.

When he arrived, the adults stayed back while younger people were encouraged to throw bricks at the police, and to set fire to things in the street.

Callum knew it was wrong. He worried that if he joined in, he could be arrested or someone could get seriously hurt. But he also worried that if he walked away, the men who had organised it would see him as disloyal, and he was frightened about what might happen next.



Callum wasn't making a free choice. Adults had put him in a situation where he felt trapped, and expected him to take the risks while they stayed out of danger. That is Child Criminal Exploitation.

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*Stock images have been used throughout this publication to protect identities.