The REIGN Collective C.I.C

Thank you for attending our speech on child sexual abuse and exploitation. We trust that you have acquired a deeper understanding of how this crime can unfold in the lives of victims and survivors and that you are now better prepared as professionals to offer support to children who are still facing this issue.

Below, you will find some of the key points from the lessons we covered and our communication activities that you can utilise to assist children in expressing themselves without relying solely on verbal communication. Please do not share this document with anyone else.

Please feel free to reach out to us personally if you have any further questions or require additional information:
office@reigncollective.org.uk

We always appreciate your support in spreading the word about our organisation. Your efforts in sharing information about the important work we do can help us reach even more professionals, and together, help in the fight against CSE/A.

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10 Reflection Points from Those with Lived Experiences

1. The Separation Error

Society often separates child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE), associating them with different victims, perpetrators and environments. However, this does not reflect how abuse is experienced by children. As victims, we are not thinking about labels or definitions; we need someone to recognise that we are being harmed.

The word “exchange” within CSE can unintentionally suggest choice or consent. In reality, children are manipulated, deceived and coerced. Perpetrators may exploit needs for affection, belonging, safety or survival, rather than simply offering money or gifts. These dynamics can exist inside or outside the family home. Abuse does not fit neatly into professional boxes.

2. Assumptions Cause Harm

We often associate sexual abuse with neglect, instability, dysfunction or “high-risk” environments. This can create false reassurance when a child appears happy, well cared for or lives in a seemingly stable home.

All children can be vulnerable because perpetrators exploit access, trust, power, opportunity and unmet needs wherever they exist. When professionals rely on assumptions about what abuse or a victim should look like, communication can be misinterpreted and warning signs overlooked. A change of home, placement or setting does not automatically remove the danger. Risk can follow a child into places adults believe are safe.

3. Failed Disclosures

When a disclosure is ignored, minimised or mishandled, it can be devastating for the child and empowering for the abuser. The child may learn that adults will not help, while the perpetrator may believe they can continue or escalate without being stopped.

Some children have experienced abuse for so long that it is all they have ever known. It may feel “normal”, making a clear disclosure difficult or even impossible.
Silence does not mean a child is safe. Silence does not protect children; it protects abusers.

4. Online vs Offline Abuse

Online and offline abuse are not separate worlds. Perpetrators use the same patterns of grooming, manipulation, coercion and control in both. Online abuse can lead to in-person harm, while in-person abuse can be continued or intensified through technology.

Images and videos can be copied, shared and recirculated long after the original abuse. Even when the direct contact has stopped, the child may live with the fear that the material still exists or could be seen again. For that child, the abuse may feel as though it never truly ends.

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5. **Indirect Disclosures**

Disclosure is rarely clear, consistent or direct. Children may communicate through their behaviour, partial information, changes in how they present or small pieces of a much larger story.

Fear, shame, confusion, loyalty, grooming and threats can make it difficult for a child to put their experience into words. They may hint, test an adult's reaction, minimise what happened or withdraw something they previously said. If professionals only listen for a full verbal disclosure, these attempts to communicate can be missed and the child's behaviour labelled instead.

6. **Signs of Abuse**

There is no single way an abused child looks or behaves. A child can appear happy, confident and well presented, attend school every day, achieve highly or have sexual knowledge, while still experiencing abuse.
Children adapt in different ways. Some show visible distress, while others become highly compliant, successful or outwardly settled as a way of coping or avoiding attention. Positive indicators do not prove that a child is safe. When professionals rely on stereotypes of what an "abused child" looks like, those who present differently are more likely to be overlooked.

7. **Education of Sexual Abuse**

As a society, we rarely speak openly with children about bodies, sex, relationships and power, yet we expect them to recognise sexual abuse and explain it clearly.

Many children are not taught what sexual abuse is, what it can look like or that it is a crime. Education often focuses on harm from strangers, despite many children being abused by someone they know or trust. Children need age-appropriate information about consent, boundaries, grooming, online harm and abuse within familiar relationships. Without this understanding, how can we expect them to recognise what is happening or know that help is available?

8. **The Ripple Effect**

Sexual abuse can affect every part of a child's life long after the abuse itself, including their identity, relationships, sense of safety, stability and overall wellbeing. Children may carry shame, blame or isolation even though responsibility always belongs to the person who harmed them.

The impact can also ripple through families, friendships and wider support networks. Many people may be affected, but the child remains at the centre and often carries the greatest weight of the abuse and its aftermath.

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9. **Trust Is Shaped by What Happens When a Child Seeks Help**

The way a child engages with professionals may be shaped by what happened the last time they tried to seek help. If they were ignored, blamed, disbelieved, punished or not kept safe, they may learn that adults and services cannot be trusted.

Withdrawing, avoiding support, appearing guarded, changing their account or returning to an unsafe situation may look like unwillingness, but it can be a form of self-protection. Trust cannot be demanded; it must be built through consistency, honesty, choice and emotional safety. How we respond to a child now can shape whether they seek help again, both in childhood and adulthood.

10. **Sexual Abuse Often Exists Alongside Professional Involvement**

Many children experiencing sexual abuse are already in contact with schools, healthcare, social care, police or other services. Professional involvement does not automatically mean protection; abuse can remain hidden or continue while a child is surrounded by professionals.

No single professional holds the full picture. Recognising abuse requires curiosity, confidence and joined-up working. Information must be shared appropriately, patterns connected and concerns followed through. Professional curiosity must not stop at the boundary of one service.