

# #LookCloser



**Building positive relationships  
with children and young people**

[childrenssociety.org.uk/lookcloser](https://childrenssociety.org.uk/lookcloser)

**The  
Children's  
Society**

## **This resource is aimed at professionals supporting children and young people across different settings.**

Children cannot consent to their own exploitation. As professionals, we have a duty to protect and safeguard children and young people from exploitation and abuse. This resource explores how to work with young people in a child-centred and trauma-informed way. Victims and survivors are more than their abuse; getting to know and relate to them outside of these experiences is vital to building trusted relationships. Taking a strengths-based approach can also help to foster trust and build resilience and self-esteem for the young person.

*"Treat a young person as a human being, not as a case you are just working on."<sup>1</sup>*

**Young person, Big up the Bill**

# Key consideration

Children have a right to express their views and for these views to be taken seriously,<sup>2</sup> yet they are often excluded from conversations and decision-making. They are experts in their own lives; decisions about their care and support should be made 'with', rather than 'to' them, wherever possible. Participation is protection. Listening and responding to what young people tell us helps to create services and provide support that reflect their individual needs.

*"If you don't listen to us, you won't get it right for us."<sup>3</sup>*

**Young person, Tackling Child Exploitation support programme**

## What young people want

Young people were spoken to as part of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. Victims and survivors all shared the same simple but powerful requests. While this inquiry relates to child sexual abuse, these requests are what we hear from young people who have experienced all forms of exploitation and abuse.

*Believe us*

*Give us choices*

*Listen to us*

*Respect us*

*Support us<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. A summary of the UN convention on the rights of the child [Internet]. No date [accessed 2025 Jan 30].

Available from: [unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC\\_summary-1\\_1.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Tackling Child Exploitation support programme. Youth voice in strategic change [Internet]. 2023 [accessed 2025 Feb 14].

Available from: [tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Youth-voice-in-strategic-change-Booklet-FINAL.pdf](https://www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Youth-voice-in-strategic-change-Booklet-FINAL.pdf). p5.

<sup>4</sup> IICSA. Engagement with young people report [Internet]. 2021 [accessed 2025 Feb 2]. Available from: [iicsa.org.uk/document/engagement-children-and-young-people-report-24-june-2021.html](https://www.iicsa.org.uk/document/engagement-children-and-young-people-report-24-june-2021.html). p32.

## Top tips for creating a safe environment

- **Appropriate language and tone**
- **Basic needs**
- **Bias, stereotypes, and assumptions**
- **Choice**
- **Communication**
- **Cultural humility**
- **Environment and location**
- **History**
- **Identity**
- **Language and communication needs**
- **Non-judgmental**
- **Presentation**
- **Privacy**
- **Professionals' qualities**
- **Resources**
- **Rights and entitlements**
- **Support services**
- **Timing**
- **Transparency**
- **Trauma awareness**
- **Trusted adults**
- **Voice of the child**

## Appropriate language and tone

**Avoid victim blaming language:** Be conscious of language you are using when talking to children and young people. Victim blaming language can impact how they, and professionals, view their experiences of abuse. This can have long-lasting impacts and prevent victims and survivors getting the support they require and deserve. More guidance can be found in the resource section of this guide.

**Think about your tone of voice:** Ensure you are speaking sensitively and in a non-judgemental manner. If a child raises their voice or becomes angry, remain calm in how you respond to demonstrate that they are safe to express their emotions with you.

**Be sensitive:** While you may be used to having these conversations as part of your role, remember that abuse and exploitation are traumatic and will be difficult for many victims and survivors to talk about.

**Avoid repetition:** Wherever possible, avoid the young person having to repeat their story multiple times, including by obtaining information through trusted professionals already working with the young person. Where this isn't possible, acknowledge it may be difficult and why this may be needed again.

**Be direct:** Ensure the language you're using isn't ambiguous. This can be confusing and difficult, especially for young people with additional learning needs.

**Be patient:** Building trust takes time and it can be extremely difficult for victims and survivors to talk about their experiences of abuse.

## Basic needs

According to Maslow, humans have a hierarchy of needs, with physiological needs at the very bottom.<sup>5</sup> This includes aspects such as food, drink, sleep, and accommodation. Maslow argues that if these most basic needs are not met, then higher needs can’t be fulfilled. When meeting a young person, consider if they are hungry, thirsty, or tired. These needs should be fulfilled if possible before any intervention takes place.

## Bias, stereotypes, and assumptions

We all hold biases and assumptions, whether these are conscious or unconscious. We must challenge ourselves, and others, to ensure that each child is recognised as a child and given the safeguarding response they have right to. Our appropriate language guide explores this further and suggests some questions that can be used to challenge biases and assumptions. Below are some examples of bias that we see most commonly in practice; however, this is not an exhaustive list.

## Gender

Girls are most likely to be seen to be victims of sexual exploitation. Boys are most likely to be seen as victims of criminal exploitation. In reality, children of all genders may experience each of these harms, but male victims of sexual abuse and female victims of criminal exploitation are often overlooked and underrepresented in data; trans children’s experiences of exploitation are often overlooked altogether. By remaining open to the possibility that the young person before us may have experienced any and possibly multiple forms of harm, we will be better placed to identify what is really going on and to ensure that they receive the right support. We will also be best placed to build a positive relationship with the child when we respect their identity. This may include asking the child about their pronouns.

## Age

Children cannot consent to their own abuse and should always be treated as a child right up until they turn 18. It’s also important to recognise that exploitation and abuse don’t end when the child turns 18, yet responses from services can change drastically or cease to exist altogether. Transitional safeguarding focuses on the need to safeguard young people from adolescence into adulthood, recognising that transition is a journey, not an event. Every young person will experience this differently.<sup>6</sup>

## Race

Children of the global majority are often discriminated against because of the colour of their skin or assumptions made about their community.<sup>7</sup>

One example of this is ‘adultification’, which happens when preconceptions held about children lead to them being treated and perceived as being more ‘adult-like’ than their actual age.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Maslow, A. H. A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review* [Internet]. 1943; 50(4), 370–396. [Accessed 2025 Feb 6]. Available from: [doi.org/10.1037/h0054346](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346).

<sup>6</sup> GOV.UK. Bridging the gap: Transitional safeguarding and the role of social work with adults [Internet]. 2021 [accessed 2025 Jan 2025]. Available from: [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/990426/dhsc\\_transitional\\_safeguarding\\_report\\_bridging\\_the\\_gap\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/990426/dhsc_transitional_safeguarding_report_bridging_the_gap_web.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> The Children’s Society uses the term ‘people of the global majority’ in line with its anti-racist position. This term seeks to decentre whiteness and recognise that people of colour, those who are dual-heritage, and those indigenous to the global south make up over 80% of the world’s population and should therefore not be labelled ‘minorities’. We use this instead of more commonly used terms such as Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic (BAME).

<sup>8</sup> Goff et al. The essence of innocence: consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *J Pers Soc Psychol* [Internet]. 2014; 106(4): 526-45. [accessed 2025 Feb 6]. Available from: [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24564373/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24564373/).

Adultification disproportionately affects black children (as evidenced in a number of serious case reviews in recent years) and other children from the global majority including refugee and migrant children. It perpetuates negative stereotypes and racism and can lead to significant safeguarding failures. This is reflective of other forms of discrimination. It is therefore important for professionals to be aware of all biases and areas of systemic oppression that impact children's lives.

*"[Police] stop and search black, Asian, and minority ethnic young people for no reason. It feels targeted and ruins relationships between young people and the police."<sup>9</sup>*

## **Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme**

### **Sexuality**

Many victims and survivors within the LGBTQ+ community have felt that their experiences of abuse have been dismissed as 'experimenting' due to their sexuality or gender identity.

### **Choice**

Fostering choice and agency is one element of a trauma-informed approach. Young people should be given a choice about their care and support wherever possible. When children and young people are exploited and abused, the ability to make choices is taken away from them, giving the abuser control and power. Giving young people choice and both encouraging and acting on their views and opinions can help to build confidence, agency, and trust. It also works to mitigate the harm caused by the abuser.

## Communication

We hear from victims and survivors that lack of communication from professionals can influence their ability to trust them. Good communication can include letting young people know if you’re going to be late to a meeting with them, as well as keeping them updated about any current or future proceedings.

## Cultural humility

Cultural humility requires a commitment to a lifelong process of learning about another’s culture, while continually reflecting on our own biases, beliefs, and cultural identities.<sup>10</sup> Cultural humility recognises that we can never know everything; we may get things wrong, but we have a mindset of openness and reflexivity that allows us to acknowledge this and constantly learn and evolve.

Victims and survivors of abuse and exploitation tell us that professionals need to have cultural humility in order to build trusted relationships with them. Failure to do so can increase barriers between victims, professionals, and services, leaving children and young people exposed to risk and harm, with key safeguarding opportunities overlooked and dismissed. Below are some examples of cultural humility and links to other sections that can support cultural humility.

## Cultural humility is also relevant to the following areas discussed elsewhere in this resource

**History**

**Bias, stereotypes and assumptions**

**Identity**

**Language and communication needs**

Seek to understand what culture means to the young person and what this may then mean for working with them, rather than assuming based on previous experiences with people of a similar culture.

See the child as an individual, rather than making assumptions based on their community or identity based on your previous experiences with different communities

Prioritise what you are told by the victim about their experience and speak to them directly, one to one, and in a safe place. Working alongside communities can be beneficial in most instances, but including community members in safeguarding responses can sometimes prevent young people sharing their experiences of abuse or being able to speak to professionals alone or at all. Explain the young person’s rights, as these may be different from their place of birth or countries they have lived in previously. For example, the child may arrive from a country without legal rights for children and may believe they should always defer to adults, even those abusing them.

Name things yourself first as a professional to create a safe space for the young person. For example, share your pronouns and let them know they will be listened to and not judged.

When working with a child, consider things like access to the types of food they normally eat (such as halal food) or whether they need breaks so that they can pray or access to a prayer room.

<sup>10</sup> Th10 Tervalon M, Murray-Garcia J. Cultural humility versus cultural competence: A critical distinction in defining physician training outcomes in multicultural education. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*. [Internet]. 1998;9(2): 117–125. [Accessed 2025 Feb 25]. Available from: doi:[10.1353/hpu.2010.0233](https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.2010.0233).

*"Don't put me in a box and conclude that all my issues are like any other young person's."<sup>11</sup>*

## Young person, Tackling Child Exploitation support programme

### Environment and location

- Ask where and when the young person wants to meet. If that's not possible, notify them of when you will meet with them – don't just turn up.
- Is the room or venue suitable? Contextual factors may place the young person in danger or prevent them from meeting with you. Think about safety, privacy, comfort, accessibility, and sensory needs.
- Do they have the means to travel to meet you?
- Does the young person need to travel through an area where others may pose a risk to them?
- Is the meeting room private and does the room have negative associations for the young person?
- Do police interviews need to take place at a police station or can you travel to a location that the young person knows and is comfortable in, such as the office of a charity supporting them?

### History

The young person may have a negative view of professionals based on their own, their family's, or their community's past experiences with services. Communities' experiences of discrimination and prejudice from the state or where they have felt agencies like the police have not done enough to protect them can often impact a young person's trust in these institutions. They may not see you as someone who is there to help them.

It is therefore essential that you model inclusive and respectful practice in all your interactions with young people, no matter how they perceive or interact with you.

<sup>11</sup> Tackling Child Exploitation support programme. Youth voice in strategic change. p7.

## Identity

There are many different and intersecting characteristics that can define a young person's identity. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to describe how aspects of identity overlap and create unique experiences of discrimination.<sup>12</sup> We hear from young people that it's important for professionals to understand the various aspects of their identity to provide the best support and build trusted relationships. Understanding each person as an individual can also help challenge any bias and assumptions which we may hold and encourage a person-centered approach.

*"Listen to minorities and allow minoritised kids to speak on their experience."<sup>13</sup>*

**Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme**

*"When a young person is gender neutral, an adult is less likely to intervene because adults generally don't understand the concept of gender identity and gender neutrality."<sup>14</sup>*

**Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme**

<sup>12</sup> Crenshaw, K. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. Stanford Law Review [Internet] 1991; 43(6): 1241–1299. [Accessed 2025 Feb 6]. Available from: [doi.org/10.2307/1229039](https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039).

<sup>13</sup> The Children's Society. Everyone has a role to play in preventing child exploitation. p27.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p11.

*"People have misconceptions about how neurodivergent people present – there should be more awareness."<sup>15</sup>*

## Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme

### Language and communication needs

Ask about and consider the language that the young person speaks and whether they need additional support. Consider the below.

**Use of an interpreter:** If the child or young person doesn't speak or write English as a first language, they may need an interpreter. Best practice is to use an independent interpreter who is not part of the young person's community, as this may be a barrier to the young person speaking about their experiences and may breach confidentiality.<sup>16</sup> If an independent and professionally qualified interpreter is not used, there is a greater risk that there may be links between the interpreter and perpetrators. Interpreters should be formally qualified and aware of agreements around confidentiality to ensure that the young person is able to speak freely and without fear. Using a consistent interpreter with each young person can aid relationship and trust building. It also allows you to work more collaboratively with the interpreter, such as by agreeing what language and terms to use when describing the young person's abuse in order to make them more comfortable (and because finding the 'right' term can be challenging when working across languages).

**Speech, language, and communication needs:** There are many children and young people who may require additional support with speech, language, and communication. It's important to ensure these needs are met and they have the same opportunity to share their experiences and be heard. This may involve using Makaton, sign language, or communication boards. Speaking with the child and trusted adults about what works best for that child or young person can help to ensure they feel able to communicate.

**Not being able to name the abuse:** Some victims and survivors may not understand that what they have or are experiencing is abuse and may not identify with the labels of 'victim' or 'survivor'. They may not know the words to describe what has happened to them. As professionals, it's our responsibility to name what is happening, or has happened, to the child as abuse; we must make sure they know that they are not to blame, while also being sensitive to the language they feel comfortable with when describing themselves and their experiences.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p12.

<sup>16</sup> CSA Centre. Child sexual abuse of African Asian and Caribbean heritage children a knowledge review [Internet]. 2024 [accessed 2025 Feb 3].

Available from: [csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/07/Child-sexual-abuse-of-African-Asian-and-Caribbean-heritage-children-A-knowledge-review.pdf](https://csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/07/Child-sexual-abuse-of-African-Asian-and-Caribbean-heritage-children-A-knowledge-review.pdf) p37.

## Non-judgemental

We hear from victims and survivors that they don't want to talk about their experience of abuse as they are frightened they won't be believed, or will be blamed for the abuse. You can help navigate these feelings with the young person by affirming they are doing the right thing by telling someone and letting them know they aren't to blame.

**For example:** "Thank you for sharing that with me today, that must have been difficult. What has happened to you isn't your fault."

## Presentation

Body language: This can also impact your engagement with a child or young person. Think about the following: uncrossing your arms, mirroring the young person's level of eye contact, and practicing active listening. Where and how you sit or stand can affect the young person. For example, sitting at their level can feel less intimidating and help to put the young person at ease. Wearing a uniform or lanyards or even having your radio turned up can impact if and how a young person engages with you.

## Privacy

Ensure the young person's personal information is respected and private wherever possible. Think about where and with whom you're sharing information and the purpose for doing so. For example, it is vital that information is shared for safeguarding purposes but ensure this is proportionate and consider what information you don't need to share. Breaching children's privacy, such as sharing aspects of their sexual or gender identity without consent, can have a devastating impact on their trust in you as a professional.

## Professionals' qualities

In our own work and in reports from other expert organisations, young people continue to tell us the key qualities that are important for them to build a trusted relationship with professionals.

- Empathy
- Sensitivity
- Respect
- Compassion
- Listening

*"She listens to me, and never interrupts. I feel like I can tell her anything. I 100% trust her."<sup>17</sup>*

**Young person, The Children's Society's SCARPA service**

*"If I feel heard and respected then I feel more accepted and not judged."<sup>18</sup>*

## **Young person, Tackling Child Exploitation support programme**

### **Resources**

Fidget toys, colouring books, and having pen and paper can help young people to feel more at ease. While these may seem like a 'nice to have', they can make a real difference for young people who have experienced trauma or are neurodivergent.

### **Rights and entitlements**

Many young people won't know their rights and entitlements or may lack the confidence to ask. Ensure you know what their rights and entitlements are so the information you are giving is correct – if you don't know, check before giving the young person a definite answer. This information should be in clear and plain language, with accessibility needs taken in to account. Resources explaining the rights of the child can be helpful for young people to see or be given. See cultural humility for additional considerations.

### **Support services**

Accessing additional support and specialist services has been helpful for many victims and survivors. Knowing which services are available and referring young people to them in a timely manner can play a crucial role in their recovery. Support for the young person should be holistic. Look beyond their abuse and think about aspects of their identity and where other support or advice may be beneficial. Don't assume which support is needed; your own biases and assumptions may influence what you believe is necessary.

Be realistic with the young person about the help and support that is available and how long this may take. Don't make promises that you can't keep and let them know what the next steps will look like going forward.

### **Timing**

If you're arranging to meet a young person, think about the timing of your meetings. For example, arranging a meeting during a lesson or activity they enjoy will impact their level of engagement.

Stick to the agreed times and dates. If you're running late or can't make it, let the young person know. This shows that you respect the young person's time and can help build trust.

## Transparency

This includes providing clarity about your role and the role of other professionals who may be involved in supporting the young person. Be clear with the young person about how and why you might need to share their information, and who this will be shared with.

## Trauma awareness

Trauma is complex and each person's response to it is different. This section highlights some key examples, but you can find more in-depth information through the links on our resource page.

Children's responses to trauma and feeling under threat vary considerably. These responses are often referred to as flight, fight, freeze, or flop.

### What can this look like in reality?

- Anger
- Agitation
- Aggression
- Avoidance
- Detachment
- Defensive
- Dissociation
- Fearful
- Running away
- Trying to 'protect' the abuser
- Laughter
- Compliance
- Non-responsive

*"If [the young person] struggles with communication they might be overwhelmed and 'freeze' or have stiff body language."<sup>19</sup>*

**Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme**

*"If the young person is over stimulated by the experience, they may act hostile or react negatively. If approached by an unknown adult, they may not be receptive to the adult offering help."<sup>20</sup>*

## **Young person, The Children's Society's Prevention programme**

All of these are valid responses to trauma and should not be used as a reason to dismiss abuse or to argue that the child has made a 'choice'. Children can never consent to their own abuse.

Allowing the young person to take their time and share their experiences at a pace they feel comfortable with is important. Trauma often impacts a young person's ability to recall memories and victims and survivors have shared that their experiences have been questioned or disbelieved when they were unable to recall memories.

### **Trusted adults**

You may not always be the best person to speak with the young person. Give the young person a choice where possible, as aspects of their identity and/or prior experiences with services may mean they are able to speak more comfortably with certain professionals. This may also include working with professionals who are independent of legal decisions made for the young person. Recognising this and working with other professionals can help to create a safe and trusted environment for the young person. When this isn't possible, ensure the young person's network has been informed and can provide support afterwards.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p17.

## Voice of the child

At The Children's Society, we promote the use of the Lundy model of child participation, which explores four interrelated areas that are needed to promote the voice of the child: space, voice, audience, and influence.<sup>21</sup> See our resource page for more links on how you can apply this model in practice.

The Tackling Child Exploitation Practice Principles also focus on what it means to respect the voice of children and young people across direct, operational, and strategic spaces.<sup>22</sup> Some examples include:

- recognising 'voice' as including what is said and unsaid, as well as verbal and no-verbal indicators
- using a restorative approach where views of the young person differ from those of professionals, parents, or carers
- getting feedback from young people on your or your service's approach to participation and how this could be improved
- keeping young people informed with how you have taken in to account their choices and reflections, being honest about why they have or haven't been followed.

# Additional resources

## Adultification

**Adultification animation** | Youth Justice Board

**Exploring adultification in the youth justice system** | Youth Justice Board

## Cultural humility

**Cultural competency in UK responses to modern slavery** | Modern Slavery & Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre

**Exploring culture, faith and belief within an assessment** | National FGM Centre

**Modern Slavery cultural resources** | Modern Slavery Organised Immigration Crime

**What is cultural humility** | Psych Hub

## Hierarchy of needs

**Hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people** | Children's Commissioner England

## Intersectionality

**The urgency of intersectionality – Kimberlé Crenshaw** | TED

## Language and communication

<sup>21</sup> Lundy L. Voice is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Educational [Internet]. 2007 [accessed 2025 Jan 30]. Available from: [dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033).

<sup>22</sup> Tackling Child Exploitation support programme. Respect the voices, experiences and expertise of children and young people [Internet]. 2023 [accessed 2025 Feb 14]. Available from: [tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/practice-principles/respect-the-voices-experiences-and-expertise-of-children-and-young-people/](https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/practice-principles/respect-the-voices-experiences-and-expertise-of-children-and-young-people/).

**Child exploitation and abuse: an appropriate language guide** | The Children's Society and NAPAC

**Communicating with children guide** | CSA Centre

**Working with interpreters: Guidelines for psychologists** | British Psychological Society

## Sensory needs

**Creating a sensory friendly venue** | Sensory direct

## Support services

**Get support** | CSA Centre

**Mapping trafficking survivor services** | Human Trafficking Foundation

## Trauma

**Childhood trauma and the brain** | UK Trauma council

## Voice of the child

**Participation framework checklist and evaluation forms** | HUB na NÓG

**Respect the voices, experiences and expertise of young people** | Tackling Child Exploitation support programme

**Voice of the victim** | VKPP