



CERAF Guidance

Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework

Identifying & Assessing Exploitation Risks

1. General Guidance

- The Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (CERAF) is a child exploitation risk assessment tool. Your professional judgement is as equally important as the score. Be mindful that elements of child exploitation do not exist as standalone issues and that children who are being criminally exploited are also likely to have increased missing episodes, linked to local ASB (Anti-Social behaviours) and may be victims of sexual abuse and/or trafficking, making them Modern day Slaves.
- A CERAF should be completed as soon as potential concerns regarding any form of child exploitation are identified. This may include child sexual exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), county or local drug lines, modern day slavery (MDS) or child trafficking concerns. The evidence may follow a missing episode, or increasing occasions of a child truanting from school, staying out late, associating with new peers/associates where there may be some concerns or known intelligence risk. We have also seen a rise of harm created through gang and older peer associations and youth violence including knife crime.
- Best practice indicates that **information from multiple sources** (including family members, the child concerned, school, other professionals, specialist MET Teams and Police colleagues) is needed to ensure that you have as much information as possible on the risk indicators and any **explanations and most importantly evidence** for these.
- Give **timeframes** for when indicators have been identified – the frequency and extent of concerns/incidents should be informing your view of the level of risk. It should be noted that in the High-Risk Indicators section you should choose **either** 0 to 3 month or 3 to 6 month boxes and **not** both
- You should **provide relevant details and evidence** for each vulnerability and risk indicator identified, as this will be informing your understanding of the nature and extent of risks – including how it may be linked to exploitation.
- Be aware that other processes happen beyond you completing the CERAF and often completed CERAFs are passed through MASH, specialist teams and Police colleagues for further decision making on Risk Gradings.

- **Be mindful of your use of language.** Children are not responsible for their own abuse/exploitation and often they do not recognise the risks we may be concerned about. Children who are groomed are unable to give consent to their abuse.

[Appropriate Language Guide](#)

- **Use the scoring guides** on the form to ensure that you are scoring the CERAF correctly.
- A CERAF should be **carried out at regular intervals** to record any increase or reduction in risk and should **inform appropriate intervention**. As a minimum, it should be updated every three months or following a **change in circumstances** (for example, change in placement, missing episodes, intelligence data) as this can have a significant impact on risk.
- If you consider that you need further training then please contact your training Team or book courses across the HIPS area on different child exploitation topics, including CERAF, Language, Missing, NRM and Trafficking

HCC Training Brochure	IOW Training Brochure
Portsmouth Training Brochure	Southampton Training Brochure

2. Vulnerability Factors

This section of the CERAF includes factors that we know may render children and young people **vulnerable** to being targeted for child exploitation. Mostly these may be static risks and often linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) or parental/familial harm.

Emotional neglect by parent/carer/family member

THINK ABOUT – Has the child suffered emotional neglect and has this impacted upon their vulnerability to exploitation? Do they feel wanted and loved within their family? Are they likely to be at increased risk of seeking out attention, affection or belonging, due to their caregiving experiences outside of their family home.

Physical abuse by parent/carer/family member

THINK ABOUT – Has the child suffered physical abuse which is likely to have increased their vulnerability to exploitation? Is the child more likely to want to be away from family or carers and seek care from people not harming them.

Sexual abuse

THINK ABOUT - Has the child suffered sexual abuse in the past? This is not about current sexual exploitation – it is about considering whether the child has past experiences of sexual abuse, which may have or is negatively affecting their current attachments to care givers and increased their vulnerability to being exploited.

Breakdown of family relationships

THINK ABOUT – Has there been a breakdown in family relationships which might cause the child to avoid going home or make them vulnerable to others who may seek to befriend them in the wider community?

Family history of domestic abuse

THINK ABOUT – Is there a known history of domestic abuse within the family which may have impacted upon the child's emotional wellbeing and understanding of healthy relationships? Is ongoing domestic abuse a reason for the child to avoid being at home? Is the impact of domestic abuse weakening the parent's capacity to act protectively?

Family history of substance misuse

THINK ABOUT – Is there significant past or current substance misuse by family members which may increase the child's vulnerability? Is parental substance misuse having an impact on parenting capacity setting boundaries and offering parental oversight of the child?

Family history of mental health difficulties

THINK ABOUT – Is there significant past or current mental health issues of family members which may increase the child's vulnerability? Are parental mental health issues impacting on parenting capacity, are parents recognising risk and harm and acting to reduce risk?

Family history of a family member involved in criminality (child being introduced to criminality at a young age by a significant caregiver)

THINK ABOUT – has criminal behaviour in a household been trivialised and normalised. Are carers actively committing criminal offences and so desensitising these behaviours to children?

Low self-esteem

THINK ABOUT – How self-esteem relates to our view of self, the value we give ourselves (our self-worth). When thinking about low self-esteem, does the child consider themselves unlovable, inferior or unworthy? Do they believe that they deserve bad things to happen to them? Do they accept when bad things happen to them and so are unable to change repeated patterns of abuse?

Unsuitable/inappropriate accommodation

THINK ABOUT – Is unsuitable or inappropriate accommodation an issue and is this increasing the child's vulnerability to being exploited? Is the child sofa-surfing or street homeless? Are they in accommodation which is not suitable for their needs, for example, young people in supported accommodation or a known 'Hotspot' when they are known to be vulnerable? Are they in the care of the local authority with multiple placements and/or multiple placement breakdowns, are they being Cuckooed?

Isolated from peers/social networks

THINK ABOUT – Does the child lack a stable safe and positive friendship group? Do they have appropriate friends of their own age? Do they struggle to maintain appropriate friendships and tend to drift around? Do they feel lonely and that they have no real friends so will readily be targeted by exploiters?

Lack of positive relationship with a protective/nurturing adult

THINK ABOUT – Does the child have a positive relationship with an adult who is protective and nurturing of them, for example, parent, extended family, family friend, professional? Without this children are more likely to accept or be in negative friendships.

Child has diagnosed physical and/or learning disability and/or Neurodivergent condition

THINK ABOUT – Does the child have a physical or learning disability which is increasing their vulnerability/susceptibility to being targeted for grooming/exploitation? Having an EHCP or ADHD/ADD diagnosis might mean a child is less boundaried or accepting of boundaries and so fail to see risk in the wide community.

3. Medium Risk Indicators

This section of the CERAF includes indicators that are associated with risk of, or that may indicate, abuse through children being missing, exploited or trafficked.

TIMEFRAME: These should be ticked if they are currently present or have been present during the past three months.

Regularly staying out late (this may include periods of staying out all day and whereabouts unknown)

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – Is the child demonstrating a pattern of staying out late or has there been a recent change? Are they just pushing boundaries, or does it appear to be indicating something more concerning? **Provide details of dates** this has happened, how late they have stayed out, who they were with, where they went, how did they act when they left/returned? Note anything else relevant about the incidents. Are they missing and has this been actioned, recorded and followed up with a Return Conversation?

Unknown or known adults/older/peers making in person contact which may cause harm to the child – (e.g., waiting outside schools, calling at home address, known Hotspots)

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – that there are harmful people seeking out the child either physically or over social media. Is there evidence that these people present an exploitation risk to the child? Do you have details of what they look like, car registrations etc. what can you evidence from other sources, Op MET meetings and intelligence data.

Use of a mobile phone that causes concern (e.g. multiple phones, contact from unknown / concerning people)

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – That the child's mobile phone use gives cause for concern regarding exploitation? Are they communicating with or being contacted by someone of concern? Are they sending/receiving explicit images? Are they receiving lots of calls/messages from unknown sources or at odd times of the day? Does their demeanour change following contact on their phone, or do they leave their home straight after? Do they have more than one phone, or is their phone use or messages indicative of involvement in drug supply?

Remember: It is quite usual for teenagers to have sole control of their mobile phone so this in itself should not give you cause for concern. You need to think about the connection with the child's mobile phone use and possible exploitation. It is also important to consider that mobile phones are expensive, and most teenagers do not have more than one phone. Those that do may need further clarification from a parent/carer.

Expressions of despair (self-harm, overdose, eating disorder, challenging behaviour, aggression, carrying weapons, other sudden change in wellbeing)

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – That there has been a change in emotional wellbeing and/or behaviour which could be reactions to undisclosed trauma, for example, self-harming, acting very aggressively or withdrawn, taking overdoses? Is the child carrying weapons because they feel threatened / at risk of harm from others?

Consider the context around the behaviour and any potential triggers – consider any other likely explanations which may be non-exploitation related, remember that teenagers as part of their development will want to explore their own sense of self away from family.

Exclusion from school or unexplained absences from or not accessing school/college/training/work

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – That the child is out of education/training/employment and their whereabouts is unknown because of this. Is the child missing from school and their whereabouts is unknown or are there concerns about where they are going/who they are meeting?

Consider that an exploited child may be made leave school premises to drug deal and under threat so show clear anxiety and a need to leave immediately.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), pregnancy/termination of pregnancy

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – Has the child contracted STI's, been pregnant and/or had a termination and there is concern this could link to Sexual Exploitation? If the child is accessing sexual health services in relation to the above issues, does the sexual health nurse/health professionals have concerns? Was the child accompanied to any appointment by anyone, did the child use their own voice or were they close down or coerced? Any Recurring STI's and/or pregnancies/terminations should be a cause for significant concern.

Drug/Alcohol use

CAN YOU EVIDENCE – Do you have concerns regarding the child's drug/alcohol use which potentially increases their risk of exploitation? Does their substance use go beyond more common teenage experimentation (as this in itself is not an indicator of exploitation but could increase vulnerability)? Are drugs/alcohol being supplied to the child as part of a grooming process? Does the substance given reduce the child's capacity to keep safe? Are there indications of a dependency/increasing dependency? Could the child be accruing a drug use related debt (Tic is a common term, Chore is a term for stealing drugs from others)?

Relevant details: How is the child accessing/funding the substance? Who is supplying them? Who is the child using them with? What is the extent of their usage? What type of substance is the child using and what effect does it have on the child (this should assist you in considering why a perpetrator may provide the child with either drugs or alcohol or both)? Remember: This is about the **child's substance use**, not their parents or anyone else's.

Suspected sexual/criminal exploitation via social media or online platforms (e.g. indecent images, sextortion, illicit substances)

Refer to: [Professionals | CEOP Education](#) for additional advice

CAN YOU EVIDENCE - Does the child's internet use give cause for concern regarding exploitation? Has their use of the internet changed and is this giving cause for concern? Are they using the internet to communicate with someone of concern? Are they sharing explicit images of themselves or receiving them from others? Are they arranging to meet up with strangers/people they only know from being on line? Are there indications that they are being groomed on social media platforms or gaming platforms (X Box or PlayStation Live)?

Consider if a parent or carer is able to monitor social media use and by not monitoring does that increase the risk of being groomed and exploited

Living independently and failing to respond to attempts by worker to keep in touch

CAN YOU EVIDENCE - This relates to young people who are living semi - independently (not at home), for example, they may be in some form of supported accommodation. Consideration should be given as to whether the child's failure to respond to the workers attempts to keep in

touch are a change in their usual behaviour or have a cause other than exploitation. Are they engaging with anyone else? Are there **Cuckooing** risks? This indicator relates to the concern that the cause for the young person's non-engagement is because they are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, exploitation.

“cuckooing” (also known as “forced home invasion”) – a tactic used by criminals, typically drug dealers, to take over the homes of vulnerable individuals, such as care leavers or those with addiction, physical or mental health issues, and use the property as a base for criminal activity. This is a common characteristic of the county lines business model and can occur in a range of settings such as rental and private properties, student accommodation, prisons, and commercial properties;

[Criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: county lines \(accessible version\) - GOV.UK](#)

4. Significant Risk Indicators

These risk indicators are very prevailing in cases where children and young people are being abused through sexual or criminal exploitation.

In order to monitor any change in risk over time as a result of intervention or a change in circumstances it is important to know whether the risk indicator is **current (on date of referral or in the past three months) or recent (between three and six months ago)**. Remember to provide in your explanation details of why you have ticked “current 3 months” or “previous 3-6 months” in order that this is clear. Please remember that child exploitation risks are dynamic, and risk and harm can escalate very quickly.

Disclosure of sexual/physical assault (which may be followed by withdrawal of allegation and linked to a perpetrator of exploitation)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – have you provided clear evidence of there being an individual/group who is grooming/exploiting the child and the child's withdrawal of the allegation is an indication of the presence of the abuser's control over them. There may be possible use of violence in advance of exploitation in order to control the child. Also consider issues relating to being forced to internally insert/swallow drugs inside the body to transport or hide them ('plugging').

Remember: You need to be thinking about the context of exploitation – this is not about the child having a parent who has been/is being physically/emotionally abusive (unless you think they are a perpetrator of grooming and exploitation).

Peers suspected/known to be being sexually or criminally exploited

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – That the child is associating with other children/peers who are suspected of being exploited sexually or criminally? Is there an indication the child may also be at risk because of this association? Gang mentality/behaviours often means that multiple children may be being exploited.

Periods of going missing overnight or longer, sustained increase in missing episodes

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – Have you listed dates and times of Missing episodes, has the child gone missing overnight or longer? Provide details of when, what is known about where they have stayed or who with etc. Has the child been travelling out of the County whilst missing or found in another area/district with no obvious link (consider trafficking and county/drug lines risks). It is important to provide details of how often this has occurred within a period and the duration of the missing periods, as well as any other known details regarding the episodes.

Remember: There will be occasions when a child goes missing overnight and it is completely unrelated to exploitation, however it should always be considered.

Have you also completed Return Conversations/Interviews and submitted CPI's or discussed with managers concerns being raised for a Missing episode. Police colleagues will continue to offer 'Safe & Well Checks' to establish any criminal harm.

Groomed by older/controlling individual/group, to believe they are in a 'relationship' (e.g. older boy/girlfriend, gang/organised crime group)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – A named older boyfriend or girlfriend who gives cause for concern? Are there concerns regarding relationships with an individual or group who have some control over them (this could be peers or adults)? Has the child become indebted to others and is now expected to pay this off?

The control element is important when considering this significant risk indicator – an exploitative relationship between a perpetrator and their victim is going to involve some degree of power imbalance and potentially control, intimidation, threats, and violence.

This can often be confused with teenage relationship abuse: common signs of this include – emotional, physical and sexual abuse, online control as well as financial control in intimate relationships – These relationships are toxic and cause harm but do differ from exploitation.

Details: Provide any details of the relationship, how long it been going on for, where did they meet/continue to meet, what they do together, what explanations have been given for their friendship/association/relationship, and details of any indications of control. Consider the young person feeling indebted; being coerced to do things they would not normally do; online or offline.

Physical abuse by controlling person / physical injury without plausible explanation

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – any incident where a child is being physically abused by a controlling person or presenting with injuries that they cannot give a plausible explanation for. This may indicate that they are being sexually/criminally exploited and that physical violence is being used as a way of controlling or punishing them. Physical Injuries can also be linked to knife crime incidents and children involved in anti-social behaviours or fleeing threats.

Emotional abuse by controlling person

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – This indicator is about recognising if a child is being emotionally abused by a controlling person who is likely to be seeking to, or is, sexually/criminally exploiting them. Consider whether someone is emotionally abusing the young person in order to control/coerce, or as part of a grooming process.

Clearly outline any evidence/indications of emotional abuse, for example, humiliating, embarrassing, constantly putting down, overly-criticising, ignoring/excluding, unreasonable jealousy, emotional blackmail, domination and control, withdrawal of affection, isolating from family and friends, threatening to hurt people they care about to get the child to conform etc.

Child suspected or known to be carrying an offensive weapon (e.g.: knife, sword, gun, knuckle duster)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – This indicator is about carrying a weapon and is often a learnt behaviour. Young people who carry weapons are more likely to have adverse childhood experiences such as trauma, abuse, victimisation and exposure to violence. The view that weapon carrying is often linked to gang type behaviours is false, children carry weapons as protection because they are often scared but it can also be as a mark of being part of a gang. Either way children are often injured themselves by carrying weapons and this risk should be considered significant.

Consider: Have you seen a weapon, do you know what type of weapon, how often the child has one, are they scared for their own safety or life, have they been exposed to levels of violence that would be seen as damaging to their mental health and overall development.

Entering/leaving vehicles driven by unknown people (not taking and driving away i.e. car theft)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – That the child has been seen or known to have been entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown people/people of concern? If so – when did this occur (date/time), how many occasions, is there a description or details of the car/individuals in the car, do you have the registration number?

Unexplained amounts of money, expensive clothing, or other items

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – That the child has been observed with money, clothing, mobile phones or any other significant items that they cannot account for or give a plausible explanation on how they were obtained? If so, this could be an indication of goods being provided as part of an exploitation or grooming process? This can also include drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, does the child's clothing and items cost more than could be reasonably afforded by the family.

Frequenting areas known for sexual/criminal exploitation/associated with local or county drug lines, known hotspots or addresses (e.g. “trap houses”, Home Takeover Properties or own residence)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – That the child is frequenting somewhere where there are known concerns about children being targeted and groomed for sexual/criminal exploitation, or where sexual or criminal exploitation is taking place? Consider locations/addresses/properties (sometimes abandoned) linked to exploitation concerns.

The terms ‘trap house’ and ‘bando’ are sometimes used to refer to addresses used as a base for drug supply. These can also refer to other locations including Airbnb, B&B's, hotels, parks etc which may be linked to exploitation concerns. Care experienced Children living in semi-independent accommodation may have little professional oversight and their vulnerabilities make them easy targets for cuckooing.

Travelling/located out of area without plausible explanation/known link; arrested out of area (especially for drug related offences)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – This may be an indicator of a child's involvement in county lines (model of drug supply where drugs are exported/imported across areas and a dedicated phone/deal line is used to manage supply). Children/vulnerable adults may be used to move/store drugs or money or may be sent to other areas to sell the drugs, often being forced to stay in poor conditions and being at risk from other harms including sexual abuse.

Child found with large quantities of illicit substances or suspected of/involved in the movement and selling of drugs for the purpose of exploitation

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – If a child is involved in significant drug supply activity then it's probable that they are being controlled/exploited by others. Due consideration needs to be given to what and who has led the child to become involved in this high-risk situation, and who is gaining from their involvement (often the child gains very little and/or may not have a sound understanding of the risk and harm).

Whenever significant quantities of drugs are seized from a child there is the potential for them to become indebted to exploiters and be more susceptible to an increased risk of further harm, exploitation and trafficking. Safety planning around this must always be considered.

Child groomed and exploited into robberies/thefts with no or limited signs of personal gain

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – This may be an indicator or evidence that the child is being drawn into criminal behaviours to be ‘tested’, to pay debts or for the benefit/gain of someone else. ASB including theft is an early indicator of child exploitation and should not be considered in isolation.

Child has a drug debt (and is likely to be at risk if unpaid)

HAVE YOU EVIDENCED – a clear drug related debt, if a child has a drug debt or repeated debts that they are unable to pay, they may be required to run/distribute drugs further or in larger quantities or engage in other criminal activities. This may mean having to commit robberies or steal from others including their family to fund payments. Confiscating drugs/cash from a child may put them at further risk and planning needs to be considered around their personal safety. Specify how much the debt is, if known and over how long a period. Children under threat to pay or service a debt may show anxiety and trauma and be missing at short notice to deal. Please also consider that sexual abuse may be expected as a payment.

5. Other Relevant Information

Contextual Thinking

Understanding the wider context where extra-familial harm is occurring is crucial to effective understanding and so responses child exploitation.

Exploitation could be happening in particular locations due to the presence of unsafe/exploitative adults, it could be linked to harmful dynamics within peer groups, it might be exacerbated by environmental and systemic factors (for example, poorly lit areas, poverty, school exclusions, adultification of ethnically minoritised groups). Through building our understanding of these contexts, the influence they have and the interplay between them, we can identify where contextual interventions may need to be targeted to reduce harm and increase safety.

Protective/safety measures

Presence of protective/safety measures may reduce the level of concern about current risks or a lack of these may heighten concern further.

Examples:

- Positive relationships with protective adult/s or supporting professionals
- Sustained/access to positive peer relationships
- Involvement in/access to diversionary/positive activities
- Positive engagement with education or employment
- Parental oversight/management of internet
- Social media plan that is reducing contact to harmful people and material
- Missing action plan
- Direct work to Young People (educative or mentoring)
- Community disruption
- Safety mapping and planning with young people in response to locations they feel safe/unsafe
- Presence of community guardians who have reach into the location or peer group and can increase safety (for example, youth outreach, local businesses, transport providers, community leaders)
- Safe places the young person can access in the areas where harm is occurring/likely
- Opportunities for peers to spend time together in safe environments
- Trauma-informed school support plan to promote/sustain attendance and engagement

Child/parent's view of risks/safety

Understanding the child and parents' perspectives are vitally important to help assess what impact this has on their level of safety and whether risks were present but have now reduced or harm is increasing.

- Does the child/parent recognise the exploitation risks/concerns?
- Is the parent taking all appropriate protective steps and is this having any impact, or is a lack of action increasing the exploiters access to the child?

Scoring and Professional Judgement

Scoring guidance is detailed within the CERAF

The score is only a **guideline**, and **your professional judgement is more important**. The information you have gathered in relation to risk indicators, child/parent views and protective/safety factors will assist in forming a narrative around what may be happening to the child and the level of exploitation risk or harm they may be exposed to.

Known or Suspected Exploitation Risk

It is vitally important that you consider and qualify if a risk is factual and evidenced or just suspected. There are other agency actions that sit behind the CERAF process, and this helps other professionals reach decisions on their actions.

This is equally important to mark if knife carrying is a suspected activity or is known. the Serious Violence Duty has now progressed across Hampshire to discuss Habitual Knife Carriers within district areas and in support of Operational MET meetings.

National Referral Mechanism (NRM) & Trafficking

Human trafficking is an integral process to child exploitation and can include the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person, by means of the threat of or use of force, or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power, for the purpose of exploitation.

The UNHCR (Guidelines 2006, Human trafficking) defines the process as a combination of three basic components:

- 1) **Movement** (including within the UK) - **WHAT**
- 2) Control, through harm/threat of harm or fraud - **HOW**
- 3) For the **purpose of exploitation** - **WHY**

For Child Trafficking we only need to show two elements 1 and 3 above and do not need to prove the means.

It is key for practitioners to ensure that they always consider trafficking as an issue related to child exploitation and act accordingly. Children may be taken from one place to another for exploitation including sexual activity and drug running. Practitioners also need to be aware that CCE and drug running for county lines falls under forced criminality. This is all covered in the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

If a child meets the test for being trafficked as above, then appropriate safeguarding action must be the first step, followed by completion of a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referral.

NRM forms can only be completed by first responders and an updated system is now in place for reporting.

Digital Referral System now live

The new [digital NRM referral form](#) is available to **all** First Responders – please use this form for all NRM **and** Duty to Notify (DTN) referrals.

The online form will identify whether someone is a First Responder by verifying their work email address. You will need to complete this verification to progress with the form. After submitting the form (which will be sent to the Single Competent Authority (SCA)) you will be sent a link to download a copy.

Radicalisation and Extremism should be considered as part of any exploration of child exploitation however the pathway for this is different and a link has been added to the CERAF.