

Reducing the risk:

Barnardo's support for sexually exploited young people

A two-year evaluation

Summary report

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Barnardo's

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

Introduction

Barnardo's has been involved in sexual exploitation work since 1995 and has sought both to influence policy and practice, and to develop effective inter-agency approaches to service provision for young people. Over the past decade, considerable success has been achieved in raising public, political and professional awareness of sexual exploitation, and in redefining the issue as one of child abuse rather than juvenile prostitution. Over the same period, Barnardo's has developed a range of services across the UK to meet the needs of young people involved in, or at risk of exploitation. This is an evaluation of 10 such services.

Barnardo's services aim to achieve a set of core outcomes for the children and young people with whom we work in order to reduce the risk factors and increase the protective factors in young people's lives. This evaluation was designed both to assess whether these outcomes are being achieved and to describe the model of practice used to achieve them.

Data were collected over a two-year period, following a year of preparation and piloting of the research methods. We collected data on an overall sample of 557 young people in contact with Barnardo's services, and detailed information on the case histories of 42 young people. We interviewed external stakeholders in the locality of each service, and analysed data from a specially designed outcome monitoring form which collected assessment and review information on changes in risk and protective factors.

What works?

Barnardo's sexual exploitation services are engaging with young people who are currently experiencing sexual exploitation or are at immediate risk of such exploitation. These young people are extremely vulnerable as a result of a range of underlying factors including abuse, neglect, domestic violence and parental difficulties. They are also at risk because of a constellation of immediate risk factors including going missing, placement breakdown, disengagement from education, drugs/alcohol, homelessness, peers' involvement in prostitution and association with 'risky' adults.

Their sexual exploitation incorporates a spectrum of experience ranging from what is generally referred to as 'child sexual abuse' at one end, to 'formal prostitution' at the other. Many young people are first drawn into 'informal exploitation' where sex is exchanged for drugs or somewhere to stay. Many young women become engaged in a coercive relationship with an adult man who sometimes grooms them for more formal prostitution.

These young people present major challenges to services attempting to intervene in their lives. Most do not recognise their own exploitation – particularly in the initial stages of their involvement. By virtue of their previous experiences they are extremely 'needy' for the attention, 'love' and sense of belonging that their abusers supply. They have little if any experience of reliable, supportive adults, distrust professionals, and are convinced that they are best served by leaving childhood behind and looking after their own interests.

Despite the challenges, Barnardo's services facilitate positive outcomes for young people, and as a result of their contact with our specialist services many young people's risk of sexual exploitation is reduced. The most significant positive outcomes are:

- a reduction in the number of episodes of going missing
- reduced conflict and improved relationships with parents and carers
- access to safe, stable accommodation
- an improved ability to recognise risky and exploitative relationships
- an increased awareness of their own rights.

This research has shown that, taken together, these outcomes **significantly reduce the risk of ongoing sexual exploitation.**

Figure 1: Young people going missing at initial assessment and final review

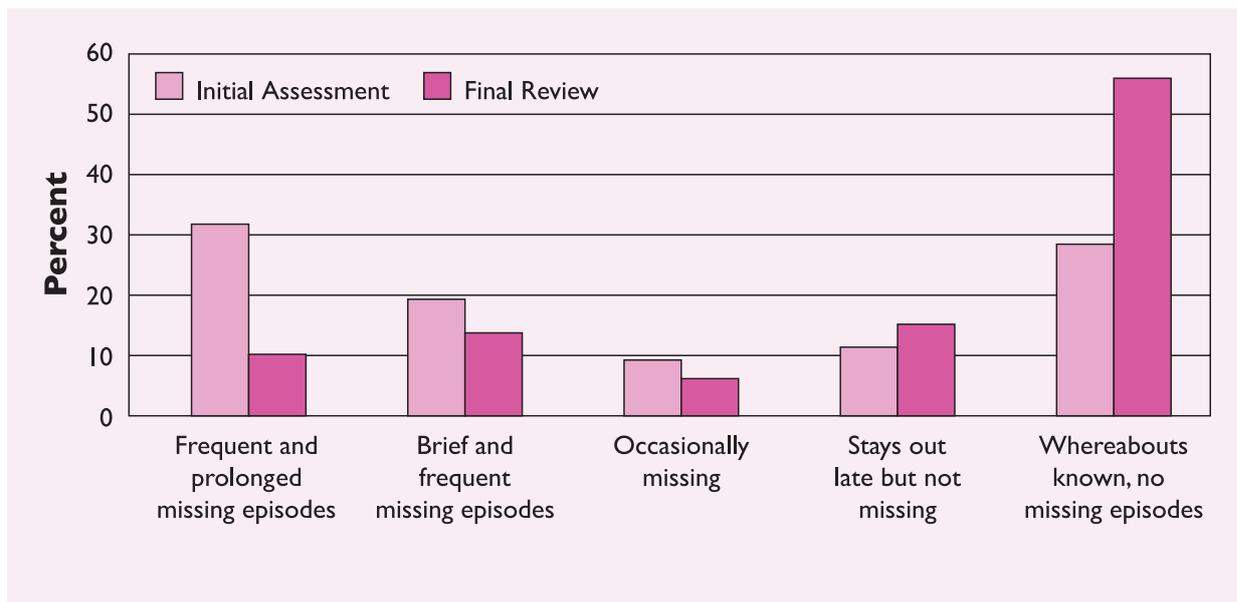


Figure 2: Rights and risk awareness at initial assessment and final review

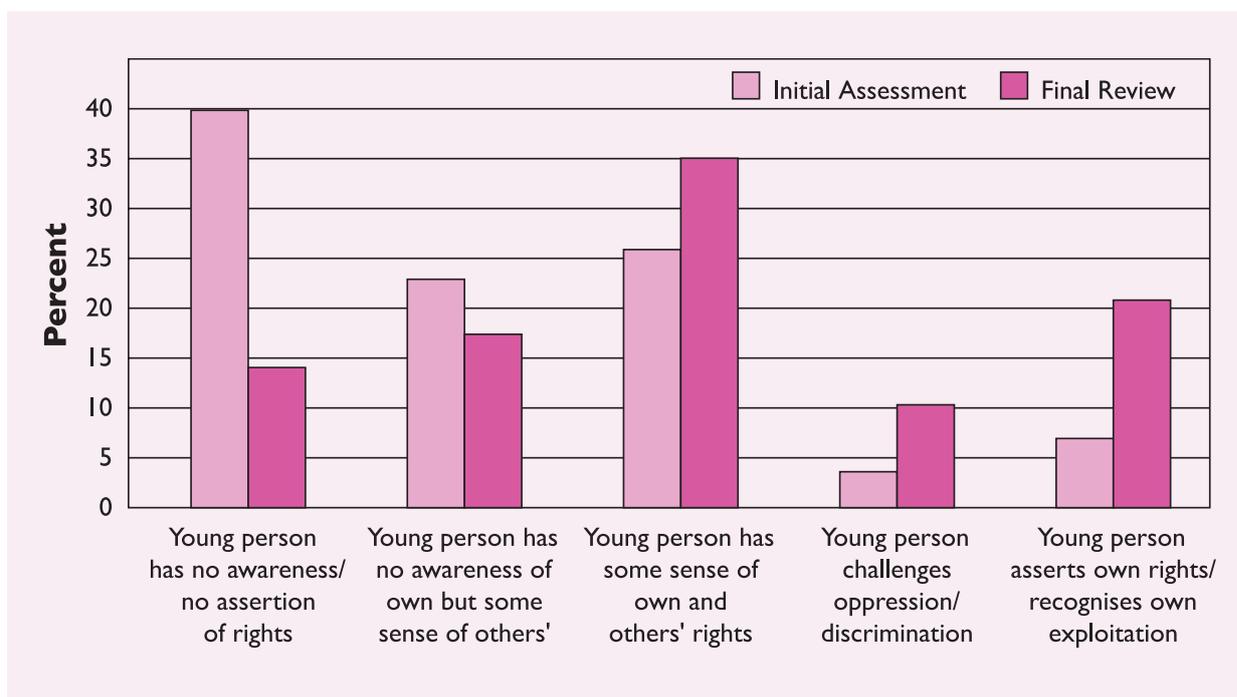
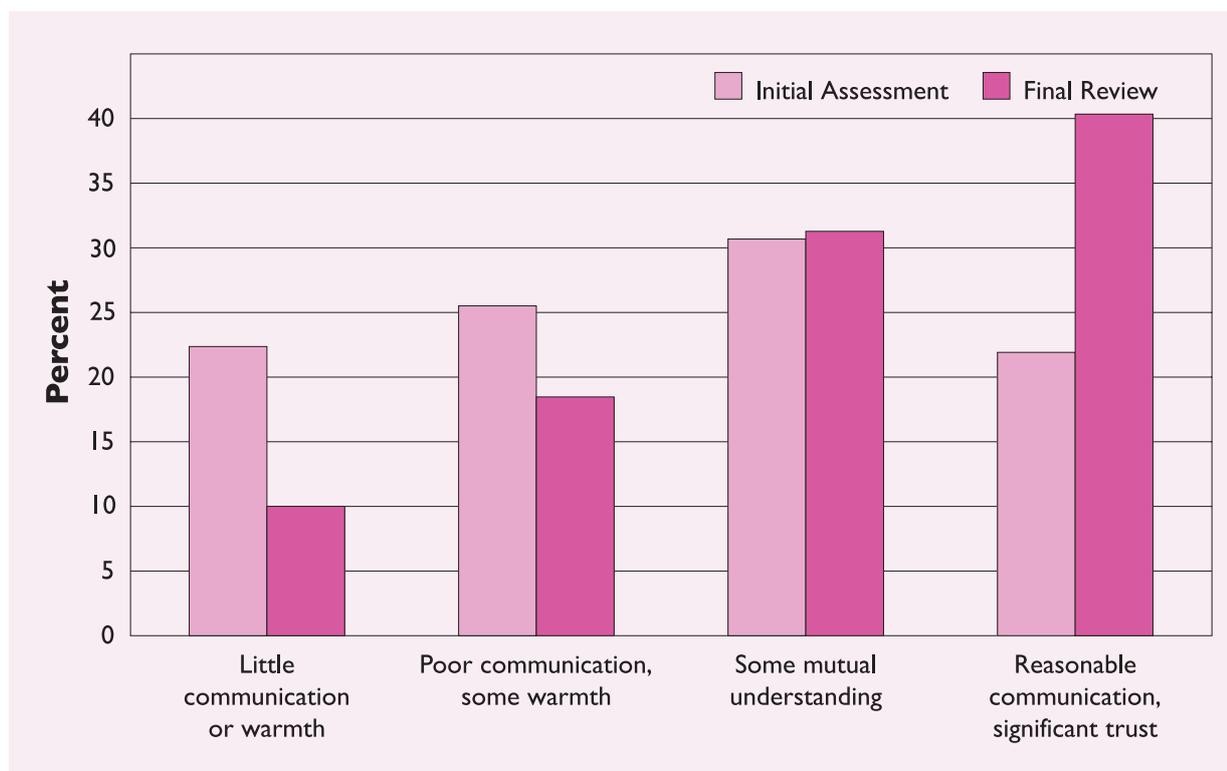


Figure 3: Young people's relationships with carer at initial assessment and final review



Barnardo's service users

The case study sample of 42 service users was selected to represent young people presenting different levels of risk, and to be representative of young people Barnardo's works with by gender and ethnicity. Information was collected through interviews with practitioners on the young people's life history, history of sexual exploitation, issues during contact with the service and involvement with the service and its workers.

The analysis supports two concepts developed in Barnardo's previous research: the importance of understanding the factors which make particular young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and the usefulness of defining sexual exploitation as incorporating a spectrum of abusive relationships rather than conforming to a single model.

The case studies also confirm our understanding of sexual exploitation as incorporating a spectrum of experience ranging from what is generally referred to as 'child sexual abuse' at one end to 'formal prostitution' at the other. Young people are initially involved in informal kinds of exploitation where sex is the price for being accepted in an adult sub-culture, a place to 'hang out', or for alcohol and drugs. Young women often go on to become involved with an adult man who may intend to involve them in formal prostitution.

The histories of almost all the young people represented here are characterised by the following factors:

- **Disrupted family life:** only five young people were living in 'intact' families with both birth parents; 19 of the 42 had spent some part of their childhood in the looked-after system.

- **A history of abuse and disadvantage:** the majority (28) had suffered sexual abuse in the family, with physical abuse and neglect also common experiences: in only 4 case studies was there *no* apparent history of abuse or neglect. Domestic violence was a feature in 13 cases, with parental alcohol/drug misuse in 14.
- **Problematic parenting:** there was a clear deficit in the parenting capacities of many young people's parents, although many remained loyal and protective of their mothers. Relationships with fathers were frequently poor or non-existent and although some young people had support from other relatives, many were reliant for adult support entirely on professionals. In the absence of support in their teenage years, many young people had made a premature move into adult lifestyles where they became easy prey for 'risky' adults eager to supply an alternative sub-culture.
- **Disengagement from education:** almost all the young people in our study had disengaged from school in their early teens, compounding the disconnection from peers, regular routines and the prospect of college or employment, and increasing the likelihood of attachment to older people involved in drugs, crime and prostitution.
- **Going missing:** many young people had a history of going missing from home, during which they became increasingly involved with other vulnerable young people and exploitative adults through a need for somewhere to hang out and to receive acceptance.
- **Exploitative relationships:** already vulnerable because of a combination of the above factors, the majority of the young people became involved in exploitative relationships. Of the 35 young women in our sample, 32 had a clearly identified route into sexual exploitation via an older person. In 21 cases this involved an older 'boyfriend'; of these, 13 young women were being 'groomed' into exploitation by a pimp/boyfriend.
- **Drug and alcohol misuse:** substance misuse was a concern to workers in 30 case studies. Sometimes this was a response to the emotional pain arising from an exploitative situation, which in turn fuelled the exploitation as young people needed to maintain their habit. In only four cases did the substance misuse evidently develop independently of the sexual exploitation.
- **Poor health and well-being:** the physical and mental health of the young people was severely compromised both by their family histories and current lifestyles.

The seven young men in the case study sample shared many of the characteristics of the young women but also revealed some differences. Sexual identity was an issue for each of the young men, with four identifying as gay or bisexual but generally finding it difficult to discuss their sexuality. For these young men, as for the young women, there was considerable denial of sexual exploitation in their relationships with adult men.

All these young people present three major challenges to services attempting to intervene in their lives. First, they do not acknowledge their own exploitation. Second, they are extremely 'needy' for attention, 'love' and of belonging somewhere – and are reliant on abusive adults to meet these needs. Third, they have little previous experience of adult support and believe they are better off looking after themselves rather than relying on parents or professionals.

Outcomes for young people

This is the first study in the UK which has attempted to evaluate quantitatively the success of specialist services in achieving positive outcomes for young people who are being sexually exploited. Quantitative research took place with ten services, both to evaluate how successful

specialist services are in achieving positive change with sexually exploited young people, and to develop a greater understanding of the population characteristics of young people accessing sexual exploitation services.

The overall sample consisted of 557 young people with whom an initial assessment was undertaken between August 2003 and August 2005. The analysis of outcomes is based on a sub-sample of 226 children and young people under the age of 18 with whom the service had a sustained relationship.

The overall sample consisted of 454 young women (81 per cent) and 103 young men (19 per cent). The mean average age of young people accessing services was 16 years, with a range from 10 to 27 years. For under 18s, young women made up 86 per cent of the 387 total, with a mean average age at assessment of 15 years.

All participants received an initial assessment. Of these, 71 per cent of young people stayed with the service long enough for at least one review. Our analysis shows that these young people had higher risk scores, suggesting that services were working more intensively with those at higher risk. At initial assessment, almost half the young people had either previously experienced exploitation or were currently being exploited. Seventy-four per cent were assessed to be at high risk.

At final review (end of service provision for the young person) our analysis shows a highly significant reduction in the level of sexual exploitation risk for children and young people aged under 18. The reduction was particularly marked for those young people who were experiencing definite current exploitation at initial assessment. Seventy-five per cent (n=44) showed a reduced level of exploitation and of these, 34 per cent (n=19) at final review were in a currently stable situation and had exited exploitative relationships.

Services successfully reduced risk factors for young people across five out of six measures: going missing, accommodation need, relationship with carers, rights and risk awareness and engagement with services. There was no statistically significant change in the sixth factor, engagement with education.

In conclusion, our statistical analyses comparing levels of risk for young people at initial assessment and final review provide substantial evidence that sexual exploitation services are successful in achieving improved outcomes for young people at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation. Particularly substantial reductions in risk were found for young people on measures of sexual exploitation and going missing. Positive changes were also observed for protective factors, with substantial improvements observed for young people's awareness of their individual rights and their engagement with Barnardo's services.

The Barnardo's model of practice

Barnardo's services aim to prevent sexual exploitation, increase the protection for young people being sexually exploited, and support them out of exploitation. In addition to direct work with young people, services carry out a range of activities including educational work in schools and other settings, training for other agencies and involvement in multi-agency strategic groups. However, this evaluation has focused specifically on the direct work of services with young people which aim to achieve outcomes via the reduction of risk and the promotion of protective factors in young people's lives.

The core features of Barnardo's model of practice can be summarised in the Four A's of Access, Attention, Assertive outreach and Advocacy.

Access

Young people may access services via referral from another agency or by self-referral. Services have all contributed to the development of protocols in their area to ensure effective pathways of referral, and this has included inter-agency work to raise awareness of sexual exploitation and increase identification of young people at risk.

The majority of young people involved in, or at risk of sexual exploitation have chaotic lives and a history of poor relationships with helping professions. Consequently, accessibility has to be more than simply making a service available. Considerable efforts are made to ensure that services are provided in a safe, attractive environment, flexible and responsive to young people's needs, by staff who take time to build a trusting relationship. Providing support to young people on their own terms is crucial, as is honesty about the boundaries of confidentiality.

Attention

Many sexually exploited young people have few, if any, concerned, attentive adults in their lives. With a history of abuse, family breakdown and poor parental relationships, often with a background of disruption in the looked-after system, it is hardly surprising that young people are attracted to the attention offered by unsafe, abusive adults. Our services aim to provide a different kind of attention; attention that will 'hook' a young person out of unsafe relationships into safe and positive ones. This entails focusing on the issues that matter to the young person and persistence over time.

Consistent and persistent attention from a named worker enables the development of a protective, supportive relationship within which young people feel safe enough to examine their lives and start to make changes.

Assertive outreach

Establishing and maintaining contact is achieved through a range of methods, including regular texting, calls and cards, arranging to meet on the young person's 'home ground' or at venues where they feel comfortable. The steady persistence of workers is eventually understood as being a genuine demonstration of concern and an indication of reliability. Such persistent engagement techniques are particularly important to counteract the influence of, often equally persistent, abusive adults.

Advocacy

Effective support to young people has to involve a range of agencies. Many of the young people receiving a service from Barnardo's have been failed by previous services and a key role of staff is to ensure that they can advocate for the provision they need.

This advocacy can give rise to tension between agencies, but an important aspect of Barnardo's work is to establish and maintain effective inter-agency protocols and practices which keep the needs of young people at the centre.

Our interviews with services and analysis of case histories have highlighted a number of factors which can act as 'turning points' in young people's lives, where advocacy for the right kind of support at the right time can be particularly important. These include advocacy to get young people into education and good quality accommodation, and to get them the support they need as parents.

Involving young people themselves in developing services helps to build the skills and confidence necessary for young people to become self-advocates.

Providing support to young people in such difficult circumstances inevitably has an impact on staff. Sustaining support to young people has to involve sustaining support to the staff team, and a key element of Barnardo's services is a recognition of the necessity of looking after the needs of their staff.

The policy context and perspectives of local stakeholders

In recent years, there have been some welcome changes in the policy context across the four nations of the UK in relation to young people involved in sexual exploitation. The key change has been to recognise that such young people need protection and that their needs should be addressed via multi-agency approaches within a child protection framework.

Our interviews with 26 stakeholders across the 10 service localities support previous Barnardo's research, that while sexually exploited young people have many needs and characteristics in common with other young people 'in need' and can benefit from generic support services, it is only through specialist services that we can ensure that their needs receive adequate attention.

Interviewees particularly highlighted the importance of Barnardo's services in acting as champions for the development of partnership working and protocol development. They also valued the expertise of specialist practitioners in working with this highly vulnerable group of young people.

All respondents expressed concern at the insecurity of funding experienced by the services.

Our research found many examples of highly effective inter-agency working. However, despite the huge improvements in the policy framework and the provision of guidance for children's services, this evaluation suggests that there is no room for complacency. Barnardo's service managers identified a number of ways in which young people continue to be failed by difficulties in inter-agency working, especially a reluctance or inability of key partners to engage in strategic approaches (most notably education, health and youth offending teams). Constraints to inter-agency partnership working impact in particular on the ability of specialist services to work fully towards primary prevention and early intervention.

Additional barriers to effective service provision detected in the research are: restricted understandings of the nature of sexual exploitation by professionals; the operation of high thresholds for intervention due to resource constraints; gaps in local services providing intensive support in the community (particularly safe accommodation, housing and substance misuse services) and particularly poor continuity in support to young people aged over 16.

The full report is available from Barnardo's website: www.barnardos.org.uk/reducingtherisk