

Opening Conversations: Improving the early identification of disabled children and young people at risk of exploitation and trafficking within England.

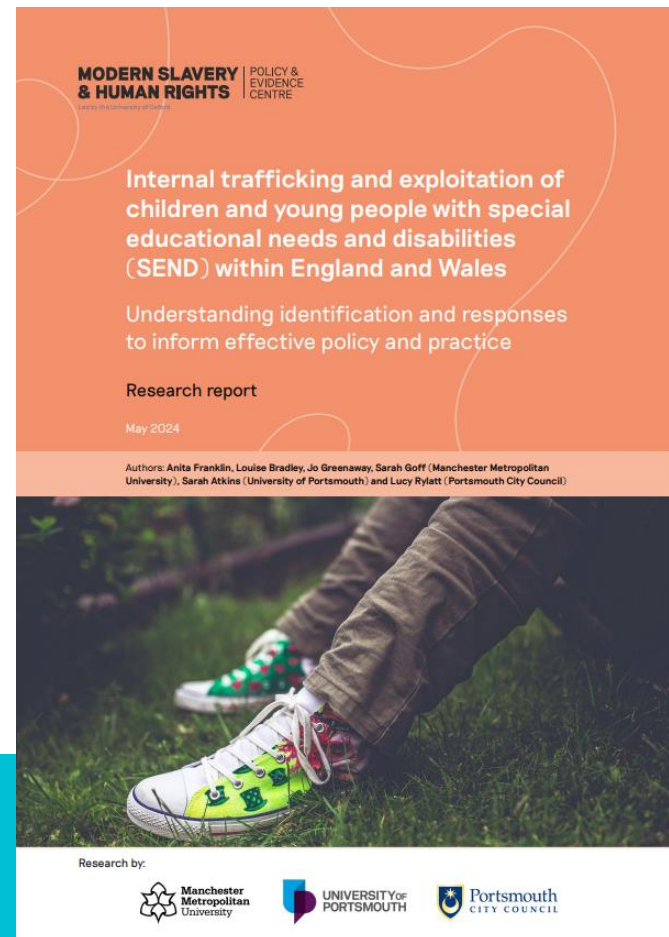
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Background

- In England over 17% of all pupils are identified as having special educational needs or disability (SEND)

Our recently published research:

- highlighted the increased risk of sexual and/or criminal exploitation and internal trafficking for cyp with SEND in the UK (particularly neurodivergent children and those with learning disabilities).
- indicated clear points at which intervention may have prevented harm.
- higher levels of isolation, exclusion and bullying
- school can be both a protective and risk factor for this group.



- Current risk assessment toolkits to aid professionals to identify if a child is 'at risk' often use **indicators of actual harm** so are not preventative (Franklin et al, 2018).
- They also **rarely acknowledge a child's disability** and how this may impact on risk, vulnerability and understanding of exploitation.
- In terms of prevention, **little adapted practice/information** to support this group of children and young people in understanding exploitation.. Or addressing the factors that can make them vulnerable.

Aim of the study

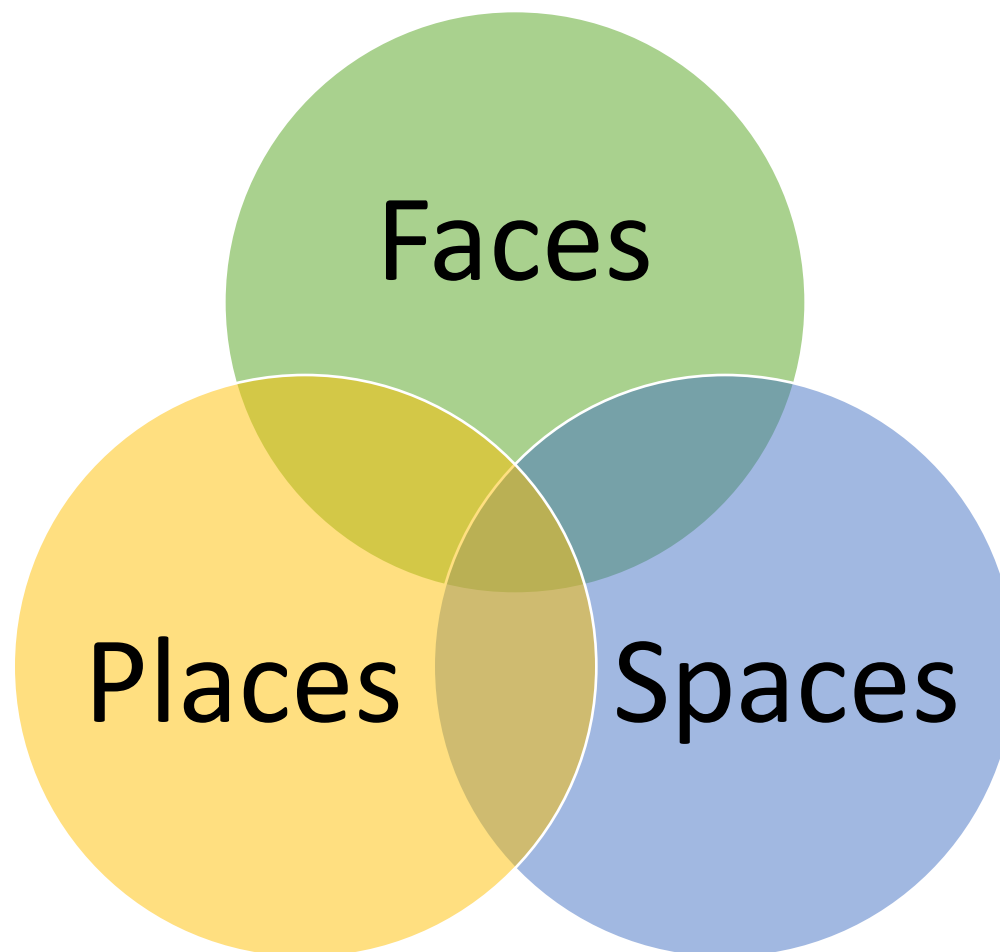
- To explore how professional curiosity and relationship-based practice, particularly within school settings could open safe spaces for disabled young people to talk about their lives, and support professionals to identify concerns at a very early preventative stage.



Methodology

- In-depth workshops were undertaken with a diverse group of 9 young people (aged 16 – 23 years with a range of neurodivergent, physical, learning and mental health/trauma-related needs). These explored key elements required to create open spaces for children and young people to feel safe to communicate.
- Online focus groups were held with 28 multi-agency professionals to discuss barriers and facilitators to opening up conversations with this group of children and young people.

Findings: Young people's views



Trusted Faces

– Qualities and ‘ways of being’

- **Trust and confidentiality** were central to young people’s confidence in speaking to professionals.
- This was, however, dependent on the adult knowing the child and being interested in them (**not just their disability**).
- The adult not having previously let them down (esp. in terms of supporting their disability-related needs or breaking confidentiality about their disability)..layers of trauma/accumulated harms.
- Additionally understanding how the child may present and communicate in unique ways.
 - This person may not be the designated safeguarding lead/personal tutor!

“Lack of support means trust can be damaged” (Young Person)

“Being available. You shouldn’t have to go and find them, they find you. It comes down to that pro-active rather than reactive” (Young person).

- Space for non-pressured, open-ended time to talk was highlighted as important (may take this group longer to communicate or for staff to understand their communication) but pace and timetables of school prohibit this...

“Teachers forget we are people, so many time constraints, 30 kids in a class.. Really difficult” (young person)

- Appropriate time: End of day? Lunchtimes?
 - Should be when child feels most comfortable – requires knowing that child.
- Knowing where to go for help and that they would not be questioned by other staff was important.
- Opening spaces for different ways to communicate (emails, walk and talk).

- Physical environment where conversations might take place.. (being forced to sit opposite adult, bright lights, smells, outside noise, being visible to other pupils)
- School seen as the place where these conversations should be happening.
 - Majority of disabled children are not accessing community activities (scouts, sports, drama clubs etc)
 - May be first thing they stop doing when struggling
 - Place for fun, down time – do not want that space for something else.

BUT often..

“Their behaviour is seen first rather than what is sitting behind that behaviour. So a lot of exclusions have occurred before they actually realise that exploitation has been happening” (Staff participant).

Conclusion

- Professionals often identified similar key elements to opening conversations, but structural and organisational barriers could often prevent the creation of quality interactions.
- A lack of training and awareness of exploitation **and/or** understanding of disability hampered any prevention work (and responses to exploitation).
- The study identifies what can make a ‘culture of conversations’ in settings ,thus, offering an environment where risk and vulnerability can be identified, discussed, and addressed before harm occurs.

“I’ve noticed....is everything ok?”

Recommendations

- Creating ‘cultures of conversations’ particularly within school settings could create safe opportunities to discuss risk and vulnerability of exploitation.
- The development of trust, the creation of safe spaces and places for confidential conversations to take place, and protected time for staff to facilitate open-ended conversations are vital to creating spaces
- Improved understanding of signs and indicators of risk of exploitation, as well as understanding of how disabled children and young people may communicate when they feel unsafe, or need support is urgently needed.

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