

## Protecting children from county lines

Life-Lines is a film by the Probation Service that explores how young people are exposed to county lines criminal exploitation. It's a common misconception that people 'choose' to engage in criminal activity. Children and young people often don't immediately recognise exploitation, believing instead that they are in control of the situation. The film dismantles this stereotype, exploring themes such as deceptive intimate relationships, the dangers of sharing intimate photos, grooming tactics and online gaming risks – all narrated by an extraordinary individual who shares their personal experiences and offers insights into finding a way out.

This resource pack offers guidance for learners through an interactive experience, providing opportunities for perspective-taking and the development of thinking skills. It can be customised to suit different audiences, based on life cycle, age, and demographics, and aims to serve as a valuable tool for all partners in our collective endeavour to reduce crime and prevent victims.



### What does 'county lines' mean?

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation that involves children and vulnerable adults being groomed and manipulated for the purpose of transporting drugs and money across the country. The criminals behind it often remain hidden and are therefore less likely to be detected. Often people do not see themselves as victims or realise they have been groomed.



### What is exploitation?

Exploitation involves being groomed, forced, or coerced into doing something that you don't want to do for someone else's gain.

# How to use this resource pack?

In this resource pack, you will find a number of activities that will allow participants to explore and open up on the topic of county lines. Some activities work best in groups, others can be done individually. In delivering the resource pack, you can pick and choose what activities to include and how you wish to run them. For the best learning experience, we would recommend following the order provided.

## This resource pack will help participants:

- Understand the term county lines and related terminology
- Recognise the exploitation and grooming process
- Explain how to resist peer pressure in relation to county lines
- Be able to reach out for help when they are (at risk of) being exploited
- Be able to provide help and reach out when they know someone who is (at risk of) being exploited

## Discussion points

Before starting any activities, set some ground rules to ensure that participants feel safe. Be respectful of each other, value everyone's contributions, think before you speak, have honest and open discussions, attack the problem not the person! If you feel these rules are not being met, pause the activity until you feel it is safe to continue.

Ask the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- What does it mean when someone is exploited?
- In the film, when did you notice that someone was being exploited?
- Why do you think they were targeted in this way?
- Can you think of any circumstances that make people more vulnerable to exploitation?



## Activity 1 – Cross the line

This 'cross the line' activity is the perfect icebreaker to give participants the opportunity to explore and share thoughts, experiences, and emotions without the need to speak. We recommend you use a big space for this activity.

**Facilitator note:** Add statements that you believe will resonate with your group, and start with statements that are more light touch.

### Cross the line if you:

- Have a brother or sister
- Have ever been picked last in a game or sport or left out altogether
- Have been picked on or bullied
- Have shared pictures of yourself with someone that you liked
- Have been asked to do something that you didn't want to do
- Have done something you weren't allowed to do
- Have caught yourself judging someone before you've even met them
- Have lost a family member
- Have parents who are divorced, or if you were raised by a single parent.
- Have ever been judged or teased
- Have intentionally hurt someone else's feelings
- Have people constantly mispronounce your name
- Have ever felt alone, unwelcome, or afraid
- Have seen someone deal or use drugs or illegal substances
- Have a friend or family member who has a disability that you cannot see
- Have done something you regret
- Have ever felt pressure from your friends or an adult to do something you didn't want to do
- Have ever stood by and watched someone getting hurt, because you were too afraid to say or do anything
- Have you ever lost a pet
- Have lost a parent or sibling
- Have ever felt unsafe and unloved



## Stacey's story

Stacey has been groomed into a relationship with a man called Scott which she did not recognise as exploitation, until he started behaving abusively towards her. With help looking back, Stacey can see some of the signs.

### Discussion points:

- What were the warning signs Stacey was not in a healthy relationship?
- Could Stacey have done anything different?
- Where or how could Stacey have found support?
- What would you do if this happened to your friend?



### Activity 2 – Spot the signs

The aim of this activity is to have participants share their thoughts and perspectives, and in doing so, learn about what to do when you are in a similar situation. Write 'Signs' on one side of the board. Leave enough room on the right side, as you'll be writing 'Actions' there later.

Ask the following questions, and write down the answers under 'Signs':

- What were the signs that Stacey had been deceived into an unhealthy relationship?
- Follow up questions: What are the other signs that Stacey was being coerced into doing things she didn't want to do?

Finally, ask what 'Actions' Stacey could take to get help or to get herself out of this situation. Follow up question: Is there anything that could have helped Stacey realise she was being exploited?



### People without a voice

The 'Loveboy' method involves an abuser targeting girls with the impression of creating a romantic relationship. Girls are groomed with kind gestures, love bombing, attention and gifts. The relationship often seems too good to be true. Girls are deceived and can be sexually abused and exploited further down the line. They can be deliberately preyed upon and be from any background. However, those who are disadvantaged - people without a voice - are most commonly targeted, for example children in care, victims of trauma and abuse, those with disabilities, asylum seekers, etc.



### Love yourself

**Ask:** Have you ever been encouraged to share private pictures of yourself with others? Who do you think sees them?

A post can reach millions of people overnight or end up on adult websites, which could be used against you.

**Pay attention!** Deception isn't always obvious, it could be friends, boyfriends, family member, etc. When someone, whoever they are, asks you for private pictures, tell them, 'No, I have more respect for myself'. Love yourself!



## Rob's story

Rob meets Asif on an online gaming platform, where they become 'friends'. When Rob meets Asif in person, he's showered with gifts. Soon after, Asif forces Rob to get involved in illegal activities for him, which Rob feels obligated to do due to the gifts.

### Discussion points:

- Do you recognise risks in Rob's story that led him to this friendship with Asif?
- When would alarm bells ring for you?
- Why do you think Rob didn't report the activities to an adult or the police?
- What would you have done?



### Online grooming – red flags

**Ask:** What do you think makes some young people vulnerable to being exploited or at risk of exploitation?

Vulnerable people may include those who are isolated, do not have many friends, spend a lot of time on their own, struggle socially with their peers, experience bullying, could be living in poverty, wanting to impress others.

- Groomers will try to isolate victims from their family and friends and build a trusting relationship very quickly.
- Groomers will flatter their victims, be very attentive and shower them with compliments and gifts.
- Groomers will ultimately threaten their victims, show aggression, or make them feel unsafe or dependent.

**Look out for:** loads of free gifts from someone you don't know very well. Remember, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

### Key terminology

- **Coercive control:** When a person you are personally connected with, repeatedly demonstrates behaviour that makes you feel controlled, isolated, or scared.
- **County lines:** Criminal exploitation where organised criminal networks distance themselves from criminal acts by coercing young people into storing, transporting, and selling drugs.
- **Cuckooing:** When criminal gangs target and take over the homes of vulnerable people to deal drugs from their premises.
- **Debt bondage:** A form of control whereby victims are forced to do things in lieu of goods or services.
- **Sextortion:** A form of blackmail, which involves threatening to publish sexual information, photos, or videos relating to someone.
- **Trap house:** A residence where young people can be forced to stay, without leaving, for several days to sell drugs.

**Facilitator tip:** Turn this into an exercise by writing the terms and definitions on a board. Ask the participants to match each term with its corresponding definition.

### Activity 3 – Gifts or grooming?

**Ask:** Who believes Rob received gifts and who believes he was being groomed? What is the difference?

In groups, have participants work on the following exercise on a piece of paper. In one section, we want participants to come up with examples of gifts exchanged between friends, and in the other section, the participants need to come up with examples of grooming. When each group has a minimum of three examples, come back together as a group and discuss the different examples. Try and get at least one example from each group.



## Kienan's story

Jackie has been recruited into an exploitative role, which she wants to get out of. She befriends Kienan. It is not clear if she intended from the outset to involve him in drug dealing activities or if their close friendship enabled her to feel safe enough to confide in him.

### Discussion points:

Why do you think Kienan wants to help Jackie out?

What is good about their friendship? Is there an imbalance of power?

How do you see Jackie in this situation? Is she exploiting Kienan? Or is she a victim?

Why would someone not know they are a victim?



## Trauma bonding

Lucas refers to a relationship between Jackie and Kienan as 'trauma bonding'. Many abusive relationships begin with a shower of affection and friendship. It is natural to develop a bond with someone who treats you with kindness. When there's trust and an emotional attachment, the 'abuser' shares something – in this case Jackie discloses that she's caught up in a gang and wants to get out. She is visibly upset, and Kienan wants to help her. When he finally gets involved, there's no way back.



## Activity 4 – Blurred Lines: Victim or Perpetrator

**Ask:** What are the factors that show Jackie is a perpetrator and also a victim of crime? Do you think Jackie would identify as either of these? Discuss.

Any form of abuse, including exploitation, involves a victim and perpetrator. However, this can be confusing as perpetrators of exploitation can be coerced and controlled themselves, making them victims.

What choice do you think Jackie had in her situation? What do you think of how Kienan tried to help her?

It's important to remember that anyone is a victim if they are involved in a situation which limits their freedom and ability to make decisions about their own actions. Exploitation involves control and coercion which may not be immediately visible.



*Exploitation isn't always obvious, but it can happen to anyone, anywhere.*



## Activity 5 – Practise saying ‘No!’

Have participants roleplay a situation similar to Kienan’s story. Roleplay a few scenarios. Give them examples and let them make up their own.

A friend makes fun of a classmate’s social media post. They leave a comment and ask you to comment too.

Your girlfriend/boyfriend texts asking you to sneak out and come over.

At a concert, an acquaintance offers you a pill and asks if you want to take it.

### #1 Just say no.

**Why it works:** A confident, simple “no” says that the conversation is over.

**Tip:** Make eye contact and use a clear voice to sound confident even if you’re uncomfortable.

### #2 Suggest an alternative activity.

**Example:**

“No thanks. Actually, let’s get some food. I’m starving.”

**Why it works:** Offering an alternative tells the person you still want to spend time with them. But you can do an activity you’re comfortable with.

### #3 Leave the situation.

- **Examples:**
- Leave the conversation.
- Leave the room.
- Leave the location.

**Why it works:** Once you’re out of the situation, the pressure decreases. Then you can figure out your next steps.

**Tip:** Create a safety codeword to send to a parent or trusted adult. When you send the codeword, the person will come to pick you up, no questions asked.

### #5 Use humour.

- **Examples:**
- “If I smoke, I’ll smell as bad as you.”
- “I’m fun already. I don’t need that.”

**Why it works:** A joke or a light-hearted comment lifts the tension.

### #6 Ignore the offer.

- **Examples:**
- Don’t reply to a text.
- Don’t acknowledge the offer. Continue talking or hanging out as if it never happened.

**Why it works:** No response sends a message that you’re not interested.

### #7 Give an excuse.

**Examples:**

- “No thanks. I always get a headache when I’m around cigarette smoke.”
- “You know I’m a terrible liar. If my parents ask, we will get caught.”

**Why it works:** Excuses give the person an explanation for why you’re saying no.

### #8 Pass the blame.

**Example:**

- “Are you trying to get rid of me? My parents would never let us hang out again.”

**Why it works:** When you pass the blame, you don’t have to defend yourself or your choice.

### #9 Pull in help.

**Example:**

- “Hey guys, help me out. I told him ‘no,’ but he won’t leave me alone.”

**Why it works:** Bringing in other people reverses the peer pressure.

### #10 Change the subject.

**Example:**

- “No thanks. Hey, how did you like that movie?”

**Why it works:** Changing the topic sends a message that your mind is made up.



## Lucas' story

Lucas is a real person with real life experience. His lived experience of county lines, criminal exploitation, and abuse and trauma is powerful. However, he gives us a better understanding of how it feels to be exploited, and the film challenges stereotypes of who can get involved in county lines and criminal activity.

### Discussion points:

- How do you think Lucas' experiences have affected him?
- He says there are ways you can find a way out. What do you think they are?
- Do you think there is enough support out there for you?
- Lucas talked about there not being enough for young people to do. What do you think?
- Do you know who to go and get help from, should you find yourself in trouble?



### Who can I reach out to?

**Ask:** Who do you have in your life you can reach out to for help? Create a 'Support Cloud', which would include anyone in your life whom you trust, whom you would go to when you need help, or whom you would go to when you need to share your thoughts. Think about your friends, parents, other family members, your teacher, a social worker, local police officers, or other professionals or contacts available in your community. Who would you/could you talk to?

If you don't feel comfortable discussing it with someone you know, there are websites and support phone lines available that can provide support and additional learning around the dangers of grooming, county lines and other forms of exploitation.

Make these resources available to your participants:

- NSPCC
- Childline
- Young minds
- The mix
- Refuge
- Samaritans
- The children's society
- Crime stoppers
- Fearless
- Women's aid
- Police



### Activity 6 – What would you do?

**Ask:** Do you think Lucas' story was inspiring? He was brave in telling his own story and now it's time for you to tell yours. Whatever your personal story may be, please take the time to write it down.

Take a piece of paper and describe what you have experienced personally when it comes to these topics. Maybe you have experienced this or someone close to you has. Has someone ever asked you to do something you didn't want to do? Have you shared pictures with someone? Have you been in a situation that involved illegal substances? Have you ever met someone online whom you grew close to, but who turned out to be different? Even if you do not have a relevant story yourself, it's worth sharing your thoughts on what you have learnt. What would you do if you were in a situation like this?

## What to do to prevent exploitation?

- Look out for any signs of grooming, such as flattery and expensive gifts, especially from someone you recently met – likely someone older than yourself.
- Respect yourself and your body by not sharing semi-nude photographs with other people.
- Practise saying no to difficult requests that make you feel uncomfortable – especially from people you do not fully trust.
- Look out for each other. If you recognise signs of grooming or exploitation, reach out to someone in your support cloud.

## Support and more information:

### For participants:

- How to get pictures of yourself removed from the internet: <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/>
- How to report online child sexual abuse: [www.stopitnow.org.uk/resources/how-to-report-something-youve-seen-online/](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk/resources/how-to-report-something-youve-seen-online/)
- Report child sexual abuse pictures or video content: <https://report.iwf.org.uk/en/report>
- Report child exploitation and sexual abuse: <https://www.ceop.police.uk/ceop-reporting/>

### For facilitators:

- Serious and organised crime toolkit: Film and accompanying materials for discussion <http://infed.org/mobi/soctoolkit/>
- National Crime Agency Report: <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/234-county-lines-violence-exploitation-drug-supply-2017/file>
- Vulnerability, violence and exploitation briefing: <http://brightonandhovelscb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/VVE-Briefing-Full.pdf>
- <https://www.csepoliceandprevention.org.uk/sites/>



## Support and more information:

**YOUNGmINDS**  
fighting for young people's mental health  
Text YM to 85258

**THE MIX**  
Essential support for under 25s  
0808 808 4994

**Refuge**  
For women and children.  
Against domestic violence.  
0808 2000 247

**childline**  
ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME  
childline.org.uk | 0800 1111

**samaritans**  
Call 116123 24/7

**POLICE**

Call 101 for help or  
Call 999 in an emergency

**The Children's Society**

[www.childrensociety.org.uk](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk)

**CRIMESTOPPERS**  
0800 555 111  
Call anonymously with information about crime

**fearless**  
Part of Crimestoppers  
Fearless.org 0800 555 111

**women's aid**  
until women & children are safe  
[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)  
helpline@womensaid.org.uk

**NSPCC**  
0808 800 5000  
[help@nspcc.org.uk](http://help@nspcc.org.uk)