

COUNTY LINES LESSONS



Over the next few weeks. Your child in Key Stage 3 will be learning about County Lines. There are three sessions in total, 1 of which will be delivered by a trained Police Officer. The others will be delivered by the class teacher, with materials developed in conjunction with The Clewer Initiative and the police.

Your child may want to talk to someone about what they've learnt, and this information here will help you have a constructive and informed conversation.

WHAT IS COUNTY LINES?

'County Lines' is a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs or get involved in other criminal activity.

"The criminal gangs operating in England are complex and ruthless organisations, using sophisticated techniques to groom children and chilling levels of violence to keep them compliant. They often prey upon marginalised children who have often been let down by multiple agencies. Many of these children don't feel that they have any choice about their situation."

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner 2019

WHO IS AT RISK?

Without support to keep themselves safe, any child, from any type of social background, can be at risk of County Lines grooming. Common risk factors include children who have special educational needs, or mental health challenges, those who are being bullied or have been excluded from school, children in care and those who need but have been denied or have not yet accessed, support.

In addition, children growing up in chaotic family situations including domestic violence, neglect or abuse, unstable housing and/or substance or alcohol misuse in the home are at higher risk of being targeted by County Lines gangs.

While gangs often target vulnerable children, this is not the full picture. Children from all classes and all backgrounds are at risk. There can be an additional financial incentive for exploiters to recruit middle class children. Often due to feelings of shame and embarrassment, middle class families will try to settle the situation themselves.

Children caught up in county lines are not criminals, they are victims of exploitation.

HOW ARE CHILDREN RECRUITED INTO COUNTY LINES?

Gang members groom children as young as 8, but in particular teenage boys, although a growing number of girls and young women are being caught up in county lines too.

A gang member will befriend the young person, buying them gifts like designer trainers, expensive clothing and food. They will spend a lot of time with them, making them feel special and give them a high status within the group. The gang member will take as much time as needed to build trust.

Once trust is achieved, a tactic might be used which creates a scenario of fear, violence or blame, the creation of a debt which needs working back or other tactics. They will then give them tasks like packages to look after or deliver. These packages will usually contain drugs and the child will become trapped in a cycle of forced criminal exploitation. This often begins by being told to deliver packages, and often extends into selling the drugs contained in the packages, travelling across the UK on public transport at all times of day and night.

HOW TO SPOT THE SIGNS

It can be hard sometimes to know if a child is just being a typical teenager, or whether there is something to be concerned about. The list of signs below gives an indication of what to look out for. No single item on the list necessarily suggests there is a problem. However, if you are experiencing two or more of the items on this list, then you should consider seeking help.

- More than one phone
- Large amounts of cash
- New, expensive belongings
- Staying out regularly with “friends”
- Unexplained absences at school
- Presence of unexplained items (knife, dongles, cash)
- Drug paraphernalia (baggies, cling film, scales, baby wipes)
- Gang affiliations
- Lots of travel tickets
- Becoming withdrawn and secretive
- Challenging, manipulative or aggressive behaviour
- Regularly going missing without explanation
- Sudden change in appearance and/or language usage



HOW TO TALK TO A YOUNG PERSON MAY BE AT RISK OF BEING DRAWN INTO COUNTY LINES

Try taking an indirect approach to raise your concerns.

- You could say a friend at work was talking about child exploitation/county lines/gangs and give a few details – for example you could describe what county lines is or talk about the ways gangs groom children and make it hard for them to walk away.
- You could ask whether your child knows about it. Do they think any of their friends or school mates might be involved and need help?

Alternatively, you could choose a quiet time and ask directly. Ask them if you can talk. Tell them that you care about them and you are worried that they are showing signs of being caught up in some activity that might not be safe. Let them know that you can help them, that you understand they might be frightened but that you are there to help them make different choices if they want to, and you will help them and the rest of your family, to stay safe, no matter what is going on. Remember, your child may be being coerced into doing things they feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about.

The control mechanisms used by gangs are sophisticated. So much so that your child may not think they are being exploited. They might believe they are being respected and looked out for by gang members. They might feel pleased to have their own money and associated belongings. They might reject the idea that people in the gang are not their friends. If your child reacts with anger or other strong emotions, reiterate that you are there to help them and they can talk to you if they ever need to.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS FOR YOUR CHILD OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW:

- Immediate danger? Call 999
- Speak to the teacher at your school or relevant safeguarding lead.
- Report to the Police via 101 or contact Crimestoppers anonymously
- Speak to Modern Slavery Helpline: 08000 121 700 or find out more online at: [modernslaveryhelpline.org](https://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org)