



# Seeing Things from Both Sides



A comic to help young people and professionals understand each other's views about young survivors' participation in efforts to address child sexual abuse and exploitation.

## About the Centre

The Safer Young Lives Research Centre is based at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. The Centre works to create and share knowledge around young people's experiences of abuse, and to work with others – locally, nationally and internationally – to better prevent and respond to this. The Centre is committed to the participation of young people in research into, and responses to, abuse in adolescence. Over the last fifteen years, staff at the Centre have been working in partnership with young people with lived experience of abuse, and the professionals working at the services supporting them, to understand the benefits, practicalities and complexities of working collaboratively with young survivors to inform and influence the development of research, policy and practice.

To find out more about the work of the Centre please visit [beds.ac.uk/sylrc](https://beds.ac.uk/sylrc).

## About the Study

**This comic is based on findings from a research study carried out by the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire.**

A panel of 58 'experts' from 18 different countries were asked about the potential outcomes, and important elements, associated with the participation of young people in efforts to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The panel included young people with lived experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation ('young survivors'), and a range of adult professionals who work in this field.

We found there was general agreement on the potential benefits of young survivors informing and influencing decision-making, but that there were also concerns, and differences of opinion, about the potential risks and tensions of involving young survivors in different activities and initiatives.

This comic is intended for both young people and professionals.

The perspectives of both groups are explored through a series of four specific themes that were identified as particularly complex areas associated with young people's participation in this context. As readers move through these themes, we hope to spark discussion between and amongst young people and professionals to help them understand each other's perspectives, needs and concerns when creating safe spaces for young survivors to be heard. We hope to highlight that a consideration of different views can help to support meaningful participation opportunities and outcomes.

To reference this resource, please cite: Cody, C. and Soares, C. (2023) *Seeing things from both sides: A comic to help young people and professionals understand each other's views about young survivors' participation in efforts to address child sexual abuse and exploitation*. Luton: Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire.

# Meet the Characters

## A Note on Language

Here is what we mean when we refer to certain terms in this comic:

### Participation

Young people's participation rights are about their ability to inform and influence change - enabled through their involvement in different activities, in accordance with their evolving capacities.

Young people who have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation may have opportunities to be involved in different decision-making processes or activities that seek to address sexual abuse. For example, by working with different organisations to inform the development and implementation of research and advocacy, co-producing resources, engaging in peer-to-peer education or mentoring, or taking part in advisory groups, or conferences relating to sexual abuse. When we use the term 'participation' or 'decision making activities' in this comic, these are the kinds of activities we mean.

### Young survivors

Though we recognise that not everyone with lived experience of sexual abuse or exploitation will identify with the term 'survivor', we have chosen this term to ensure consistency throughout the resource. The term is used in this comic to describe all children and young people who have had these experiences - however they identify.



The Practitioners



The Youth Advisor



The Young Survivors

# Readiness and Risk Assessments

Some professionals may have concerns about young people's 'readiness' to take part in participatory initiatives.

I'm not sure Ana is stable enough to join that advisory group.

But having a voice and making choices is part of the healing process.

Young people need to be at a certain stage in their recovery.

What stage? Recovery is different for everyone.

I don't think Ana is ready.

She may not be ready to stand up and speak at a conference, but she might be ready to share her views about how we could make the service better.

But she hasn't engaged in therapy yet...

Maybe this can help her feel ready for that...

Besides, it could be a chance to take part in a fun activity which may be exactly what she is ready for.

Professionals sometimes carry out assessments to help them decide which young people to approach about taking part in a project or activity.

It can help them think about what the risks might be for different young people if they were to take part, and consider how to minimise these and support their involvement.

Sometimes young people are involved in this assessment process but often they are not.

It can be awkward to talk about 'risk' when a young person is in the room,

especially if they are not fully aware of those risks.

But they need to be aware if people have concerns about their welfare.

People often think we'll always be vulnerable. There needs to be an opportunity for young people to challenge perceptions about how at risk they are —

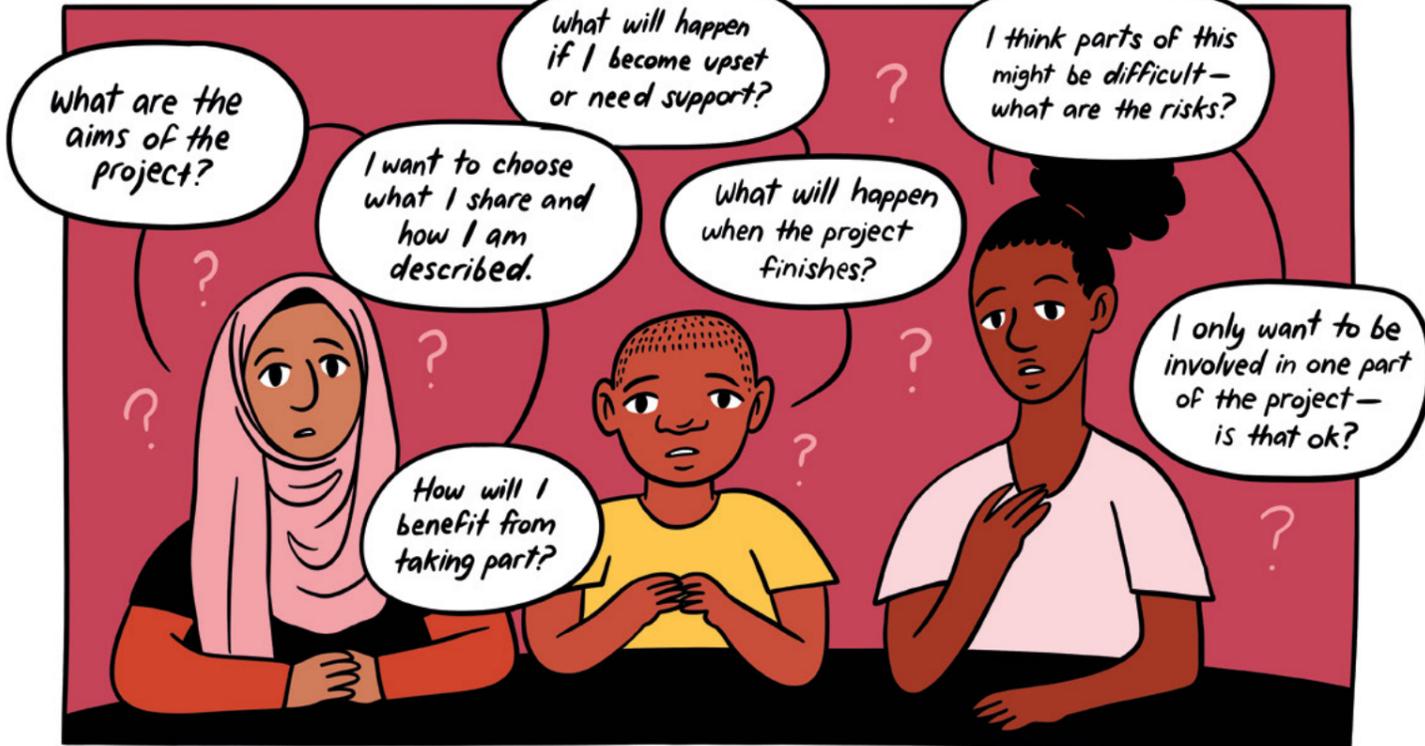
—there's two sides to every story.

Young people might lack the knowledge and experience to know the nature of the risks and what the implications might be of taking part in a participatory project.

But they should be involved in thinking about the potential risks and potential benefits. Getting involved in a project might show people that they have vulnerabilities, but also that they have resources and strengths to keep safe.



Professionals also need to think about how ready they are and what resources they have, to support young people's engagement in participatory initiatives.



# Concluding Thoughts

## For young people

- It is important for professionals to draw on their knowledge and experience to anticipate what risks may be involved for you if you choose to engage in participatory activities. You need to be aware of these risks so that you can make an informed decision about whether to participate or not.
- Professionals have a duty to keep you safe and although you have a right to be heard and to participate, you also have the right to be protected from harm. Professionals can sometimes find it difficult to balance these two sets of rights.
- Professionals may have been involved in similar initiatives before so may have a good sense of how potentially challenging certain activities may be and may draw on that knowledge when making an assessment.
- It is equally important for you to have the opportunity to share what you feel may or may not be a risk and share any ideas you may have for minimising risks.

## For professionals

- It is your role to consider and think about potential risks associated with a particular project. However, it is also important to think about the potential benefits of engagement for a young person as participation may enhance protection.
- Recovery is not linear and it is different for everyone. This means it may be difficult for you to know when someone may be 'ready' to take part in a particular activity.
- You cannot predict everything – the benefits or the risks. Involving young people in conversations about the activity may enable you to build up a better understanding of whether the young person is ready, how risks could be mitigated, and how they can be supported to engage.
- Readiness is a two way process. You, and your organisation, need to consider how well prepared and resourced you are to commit to, and support, the safe and meaningful participation of young people before introducing opportunities to young people.

# Triggering

A trigger is something that causes someone to feel upset or distressed because they are made to remember something bad that has happened to them in the past. For young people in this context, being triggered can be very distressing. A discussion about sexual violence or encountering certain situations, events, or sensations may (re)trigger flashbacks or trauma associated with sexual abuse and they may feel they are re-living these traumatic experiences. Different people may be triggered by different things because everyone is an individual with unique experiences.

Risk of being triggered in participatory activities can be one reason professionals may think a young person is not 'ready' to take part.

*I'm worried that Lucas might be triggered. Especially if it's in a group with other young people, hearing their experiences.*

*He might leave the activity feeling worse about his experience of sexual abuse. Other young people might also become triggered or upset.*

*But we can't predict everyone's triggers or reactions. We need to give them choices about what and how much they share, if at all.*

*I don't think risk of triggering should be a reason to withhold opportunities to participate but we need to be prepared to manage such situations.*

*And if anyone is triggered in this environment, we can provide support.*

*This is a safe space.*

*We also need to commit to providing emotional support.*

The risk of triggering can't be eliminated, but there are ways to manage it.

*You said about managing this kind of situation—so how do we eliminate the risk of triggering?*

*We can't..*

*...but there's things we can do to mitigate it...*

*For example..*

*...but there's things we can do to mitigate it...*

*For example..*

*Make sure facilitators have the appropriate training and skills.*

*Ensure the young person is fully informed about the activity and potential for distress.*

*Is that all clear, Lucas?*

*yeah, I understand.*

*Explain to them that they decide if, when and how to share any personal experiences*

*and this is not necessary for them to participate.*

*Take the time to plan and design the activities carefully and thoughtfully.*

STEP 1 → STEP 2 → STEP 3 → ...

*Make sure young people know they can stop or take a break at any time.*

*How are you feeling just now?*

*I could use a break, actually.*

*Check in with young people after every activity.*

*Ensure young people are supported throughout the whole process—including afterwards.*

For some young people, although being triggered can be distressing, it may also play an important role in their healing and recovery.

*It's important to remember that if you are triggered during an activity it can be difficult at the time —*

*but it can also be helpful for processing what's happened to you.*

*It helped me learn what my triggers are and how to cope with them—*

*rather than be protected from them all the time.*

*Knowing that I'm feeding into change and helping others makes me feel positive, too.*

## Concluding Thoughts

### For young people

- Sometimes it can be hard to talk about issues related to sexual abuse, or be in a group with other young people who may choose to share personal experiences. It's important to think about this, and be aware that it might be distressing or triggering, before you make a decision about participating in different activities.
- You could talk to the professionals involved to understand what the content of discussions might be so you have a better sense of what to expect.
- If you know what might be a trigger for you, and if you're happy to discuss that with the professionals involved, then you could talk about how exposure to this could be minimised and what you would like to happen if you are triggered so that there is a plan in place.

### For professionals

- Participatory work requires you to consider, prepare for, and manage (sometimes unpredictable) situations in which a young person may become triggered or distressed.
- There will always be the potential for triggering in this work. Open lines of communication and shared decision-making with young people may help to allay fears and identify if and how young people can be safely involved.
- A young person being triggered doesn't necessarily have to be viewed as a risk. Whilst having the right support structures in place is critical, professionals should also consider that if a young person is triggered, this may play a role in their healing and recovery journey.

# Feelings of Anger and Frustration

Young people may feel a range of emotions after experiencing sexual abuse.

**SHAME**  
**BETRAYAL**  
**FEAR**  
**ISOLATION**  
*anger*  
*self-blame*

Anger is one of these emotions. Young people may feel anger about:

The abuse they have experienced

People responding to their experiences in negative or unhelpful ways

The services and systems they encounter

where should I go?

Decisions that are made by others about their life which they're not happy with

Not being involved in decision-making about their care in the aftermath

Anger is a common emotion for young people to feel in the aftermath of sexual abuse and can manifest in different ways for everyone.

Young people have every right to feel angry, yet sometimes it can be used as a reason to not involve them in participatory activities – particularly group based ones.

WILL THEY THINK I'M DIFFICULT?  
 IS MY ANGER A PROBLEM?  
 WHAT WILL THEY THINK OF ME?

I don't think it's appropriate for Grace to take part in that group activity, she's quite angry. What if she causes other young people to become angry or upset?

I think young people may have these different emotions anyway. It doesn't mean we can't bring them together, we just need to prepare for and support their individual needs as best we can.

Grace, what do you think?

We can help untangle this.

If Grace is involved it could provide her with an environment where she's able to express herself and feel understood and reassured that her feelings are normal.



When young people participate in group activities with other young people, and are able to express their emotions in a safe space, this can support individual healing and recovery.

*It's not a case of group work making me angry — those emotions are already there.*

*They may just be activated in that environment, which can be helpful.*



*Sometimes it's easier to be angry for other people and what they've experienced than it is to be angry about your own experience.*

*She's not to blame for what happened to her, so why have I been blaming myself?*



Anger can help to promote positive change.

*Collective feelings of anger and frustration can shine a light on where young people want to see change.*

*And sometimes when those in positions of power hear from young people and the anger they feel, it can motivate them into making a change.*

*Anger can be a motivating factor for activism and change, it's got to be expressed in a way that people will respond well to.*

*I agree. It's helpful for young people to be able to connect with their anger and frustration — we can support them to channel and express these emotions in a positive way, and ensure we're not causing harm.*

## Concluding Thoughts

### For young people

- When thinking about taking part in group based participatory activities, it's important to be aware that discussions may cause, or increase, feelings of anger for you and/or other young people.
- Feelings of anger and frustration are normal and common in the aftermath of abuse and have the potential to be used to positively influence change.
- You may find it helpful to talk to professionals involved in the project to discuss how they can help you respond and work with these emotions in a way that helps you and others.

### For professionals

- Potential risks and dynamics need careful thought and attention when bringing young people together in groups – but participatory spaces can provide a safe environment for young people to share their collective frustrations.
- Young people will all have different behavioural responses to the emotions they feel after sexual abuse. You should avoid making assumptions on the basis of how a young person presents when making decisions about participatory opportunities and involvement.
- You should consider if and how participatory opportunities might enable you to work in partnership with young people and support them to channel their anger into something positive, and maximise participation outcomes.

# Public Identity Disclosure

When young people participate in projects and activities, they may be invited to use their voices, images or names in the resources they create. They may also be invited to take part in, or speak, at different events.

It is important that young people are supported to think about the potential implications, both now and in their future, of being associated with the work and with being identified as a survivor of abuse.

I choose to be identified as a 'Youth Advisor' or 'Advocate.'

I prefer 'Survivor.'

Before I decide to participate, I have some questions.

## How might it feel for me now?

It gave me a new identity!

It helped me turn this into something positive.

It can be exposing, when people ask you questions and presume things about you.

It can be hard to have your identity linked to something so painful.

Sometimes it can feel as if the other parts of you cease to be significant.

It was a lifeline.

## How might I feel about this in the future?

You might strongly identify as a survivor now, but that might change.

You might be 30 or 40 and people are still referring to you as the young person that was sexually abused.

How would you feel about your future partner or children knowing about this part of you?

In your future how would you feel about employers and colleagues knowing about your past?

How do I feel about people in my community knowing about this?

How might this change my relationship with my family and friends?

What would my partner and friends think about it?

How would my family feel about me doing this?

## How might it feel when people respond to my words or work?

What if you get difficult questions from people, like —

"are you a victim?"

or "did this happen to you?"

What if people laugh?

I had those questions, too.

Participating made me feel proud.

It might feel great knowing you're potentially helping others.

It made me feel like I matter.

# Concluding Thoughts

## For young people

- Young people with lived experience are perfectly placed to offer valuable insights and perspectives on how things can be improved and what might be important for other young people. Remember though that you do not need to disclose personal experiences in order to inform and meaningfully contribute to different initiatives.
- Nobody should ask you to talk about anything you feel uncomfortable discussing.
- It is important to think about how you might feel about other people in your life knowing about your experiences.
- It can be difficult to predict how you might feel in the future, but it may be helpful to talk to other people, including professionals about this.
- If you do wish to take part in different events you could talk to the organisers, or those who are supporting you to take part, to make sure that they have fully prepared and that you know how you will be introduced or involved and what to expect.

## For professionals

- Young people who have received support from an organisation may feel indebted to that organisation. They might feel that they should take part in certain activities and events as a 'thank you' to the service. You should be mindful of this and always be very clear that participation is voluntary and there are no expectations on them to do anything they do not wish to do.
- Young people may or may not wish to disclose their survivor identity in public. Either way, they should never be asked to do this. You should work with them to think through:
  - How their ideas and messages could be communicated in ways that do not require them to be identified as a survivor.
  - The potential implications for them from being named or identified as a survivor, both now and in the future.
- Even if a young person's identity as a survivor is not publicly shared, you may wish to help young people think through how they can explain their work, and any contributions to a project or initiative tackling sexual abuse, in ways that do not feel exposing.
- If working in a group, it will also be important to work with young people to help them develop a description of the group that everyone feels comfortable with.
- If young people are engaging in an event, spend time thinking about how to manage the event so that young people feel comfortable in their role and have control over what happens.
- If young people are at an event in a 'youth advisor' or other capacity, work with them in advance to prepare them on how to deal and respond to insensitive and inappropriate questions and comments.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the expert panel who took part in this research. Additional thanks is extended to the young panel members who reviewed and provided invaluable feedback on an initial draft of the comic. We would also like to acknowledge the support and partnership of a number of organisations who facilitated the engagement of young panel members in the study and who also provided input on this resource.

Thanks to our funders, the Oak Foundation and the University of Bedfordshire's Research England Participatory Research Fund for their financial support. Finally, thank you to our colleagues at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre including CJ Hamilton for his invaluable inputs. Thanks also to the Centre's Young Researchers' Advisory Panel (YRAP) - and to our Project Advisory Group, for their ongoing encouragement and input.

Comics are by Maria Stoian. Maria is a comic artist and illustrator based in Scotland, where she teaches at Edinburgh College of Art. Her portfolio can be found at [mariastoian.com](http://mariastoian.com)

# Seeing Things from Both Sides

To find out more about the work of the Centre please visit the Centre's website [beds.ac.uk/sylrc](https://beds.ac.uk/sylrc). You can also find further resources related to this project at [our-voices.org.uk](https://our-voices.org.uk).