

Sexual Exploitation. A true case example. - Laura

Laura was the second child born in her family. Her father left soon after she was born and her mother struggled with 2 small children. She coped by drinking. Laura remembers a lot of happy times from her childhood though. She lived near her Gran, near her cousins and had lots of friends in the neighbourhood. When she was 6 or 7 Dave moved in. Dave also liked to drink and could be nasty when drunk. He would hit Laura and her older brother. Laura knew that mum knew – but she was so frightened of Dave leaving mum did nothing.

The police were made aware of the situation by a neighbour. They came and spoke to her mum and Dave. The next day the family packed up and moved away. Away from school, away from the neighbourhood and away from Gran.

Laura's mum and Dave had 2 more children - twins. This made Dave stressed and he would shout at the babies and then go out and get drunk. Laura would help mum with the twins, feeding them, bathing them and changing them. When Dave was around he would tell Laura that she should get some practice looking after kids as she will probably end up with millions of them, if the social didn't take them off her that is. Dave used to always say horrible things. Sometimes Laura preferred it if he hit her rather than call her names. Mum did nothing when Dave was there but when he was out she would tell Laura just to ignore him, that's how she coped.

When Laura was 13 Dave came into her room in the night and started punching her. He was really drunk and was shouting and calling her names. She didn't try to hide or fight back as she didn't want him to turn on her mum or the twins. She wasn't allowed to go to school the next day because her face was 'ugly'. Her brother went to school though – straight to the head teacher and told them everything. The police came that day with a social worker and took Laura and the twins. There was screaming and shouting. Dave was put in a van and Laura's mum wailed and cried. Laura's brother didn't come home from school and Laura didn't see him for a few weeks. She didn't see Dave ever again.

Laura went into residential care. The staff were nice but it was still a lonely place to be. She cried herself to sleep every night. She would have rather been at home getting punched. Besides, maybe Dave was right – if she didn't have a face that irritated him so much then he wouldn't want to punch it. If she wasn't so pathetic she could have done something to stop it anyway. The twins were not hurt by Dave – and now they were probably suffering too. All because of her stupid punchable face. She would sometimes stand in front of the mirror in her room at night and punch her own face. She deserved it after all.

School became a struggle and she started to skip the classes where she found the work hard. It was not as if she was going to achieve anyway – like Dave says she will probably just end up with a million babies that social work will take into care. It was when she was skipping school that she met Connor. Laura was 14 now but she told him she was 16. He had a car after all so he was definitely older. He said he was 18. He used to drive past the bus shelter that she would sit in and beep and wave. One day he stopped. He told Laura that he had noticed her and wondered why she always looked so sad. He said he would

offer her a lift but that she shouldn't get in the car with strangers. He drove away. The next day he said he wasn't a stranger and she should get in. She did.

Connor picked her up everyday at the same time. They drove around town and laughed and chatted. Sometimes he would have alcohol. He wouldn't drink as he was driving – Laura thought that he seemed very sensible. He listened to her story of the past and understood. I mean really understood. Not the way that social work or teachers understand – he had been there too – he had a crappy family as well.

At meetings about truanting Laura would tell them that she wanders around town. She said she couldn't cope with school and was put on a part time timetable. More time with Connor she thought.

One day when he picked her up they went to a flat. They both drank too much and they ended up having sex. He thought she was 16 after all. Laura was pleased that he wanted to do this with her. She must be really special. He must really care. They did this nearly every afternoon from then on – and even though she didn't really like the sex – she did like being with him and feeling special. He said he loved being with her so much he wished he could share her. She took this as a compliment until the first time she realised what he meant.

One day they went to the flat and were drinking as usual. 3 men turned up at the door. Connor explained that these were his friends and that all he wanted was to share her. If she loved him like he loved her she would do it. She refused. He punched her in the face. He told her she would be nothing without him and that he had been good to her – and threatened to hit her again. She had sex with all 3 men.

When they left Connor cried. He begged her for forgiveness. He told her she was beautiful and he would never want to hurt her. She cuddled him and told him that she was ok, she still loved him. She went back to the residential unit and punched herself repeatedly in the face. Staff came in and placed her in a safe hold. She was terrified and she gave in easily and apologised. The next day staff spoke to her about alcohol and self harm. They asked her if she had anything she wanted to talk about and she said no.

The next day she went to school for the whole day – even though she was on a part time timetable. The school noted this behaviour was odd but asked her to stick to her timetable and only be in school when she was supposed to be. The placement said she was withdrawn and sullen and contacted her social worker. The social worker spent more time with her but found her reluctant to talk. The placement banned her from going out at night – but night time was not the problem.

Connor picked her up in his car a few days later and begged for forgiveness. He put his behaviour down to a horrible childhood and told her stories of abuse he had suffered. She felt sorry for him. They went back to the flat and drank and had sex. One of the men from the other night came around. She had sex with him too. A few times a week she would go to the flat and have sex with Connor's friends. Sometimes they would all be there together, sometimes it was one at a time. Sometimes they took videos and photos, sometimes they would make her be naked when everyone else was clothed and drinking or smoking. It wasn't as if she was worth anything else anyway.

Some months later she attempted suicide. She was released from hospital into a secure unit where I met her. Text messages on her mobile phone that she arrived with were read by staff and the police were alerted. The texts were coming from a phone they couldn't trace. The police used her phone to try meet up with a suspect but he didn't come to the

meeting point. It took many months before she told her story to me. It took longer to give the police the details they needed. When the address of the flat was given to police Connor was found in there with an 11 year old girl. He was arrested and charged.

Laura spent 2 years in secure care. She then left and went into a close support unit. I hear she is doing well and is now at college studying social care.