Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts

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Key messages

The use of the internet, social media, cloud-based storage, streaming services and digital devices such as mobile phones, tablets and computers is embedded in our daily lives – and such technology is likely to feature in almost all types of child sexual abuse.

Adults may use online spaces to have sexual conversations with children; view, download or distribute sexual images of children; order someone to perform sexual abuse on a child in front of a webcam; communicate with a child with the intention of performing an offence in person later on; or incite a child to pose naked or perform sexual acts via photo, video or live webcam. Such abuse can occur both on the 'dark web' and, more commonly, on 'open web' platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp. It can also take place via mobile phone/texting and gaming platforms.

Many adults who commit these offences are known to their victims (as family members, friends, acquaintances or figures of authority). Although some women sexually abuse children in online spaces, most adults who view, share and/or produce child sexual abuse material are White men.

Viewing child sexual abuse imagery may start in the absence of a sexual interest in children, and may take place during times of stress, difficulties with personal relationships, loneliness, alcohol or drug addiction, or depression. A common pathway begins with viewing legal pornography. Motivations include curiosity; facilitation of social relationships; sexual arousal or interest; thrill-seeking; financial gain, 'avoiding real life' and a compulsion to collect images. Many liken their behaviour to an addiction.

The impact of child sexual abuse involving imagery can be severe and lifelong, with the potential for children to be revictimised each time images are viewed. They may feel guilt, shame and self-blame, and be vulnerable to further sexual abuse. Steps can and should be taken to get imagery removed from the online spaces where they are posted, where possible.

Children who have been sexually abused in online contexts report that they receive less support than victims of other forms of child sexual abuse. One possible reason for this is that professionals feel unable to help because they are not 'experts' in the technology, but the skills required to give an effective response are the same as for any form of child abuse: relationship-based practice, talking to children and accepting what they say.

Specific interventions are needed for adults who have sexually abused children in online contexts. Although there are promising evaluations of two programmes – Inform Plus and Prevent It – this is an area requiring further development and evaluation.

More effective prevention is essential, including designing technology platforms and resources to provide 'safety by design'. Pop-up warnings and chatbots have been found to deter adults from offending, and to help them address their concerning thoughts and behaviours; this is a growing area of research and interest.

The children, partners, and wider families of those investigated for online offences experience trauma, from the initial police visit to the home and for years afterwards. Responses to them should be empathetic, discreet and non-judgemental.

Our 'Key messages from research' papers aim to provide succinct, relevant information for frontline practitioners and commissioners. They bring together the most up-to-date research into an accessible overview, supporting confident provision of the best possible responses to child sexual abuse.

Online environments and interactions are now fundamental to everyday life. Both adults and children routinely use digital communications technology and the internet – through social media, text messaging, online gaming, message boards, streaming, etc – and this creates increased opportunities for some to abuse.

This paper brings together learning from existing research on child sexual abuse committed by adults in online contexts, the people who commit that abuse, and their victims. It is designed to be read alongside ***Key Messages from Research on Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrated by Adults*** and the forthcoming ***Key Messages from Research on Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Online Contexts***, both published by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre).

Note: The term 'children' in this document refers to individuals under 18 years of age.

The role of online spaces and digital technology in child sexual abuse by adults

The terms 'online child sexual abuse' and 'technology-assisted child sexual abuse' are widely used in relation to the production, viewing and/or sharing of sexual imagery (both still photos and videos) of children. However, digital technology can feature in almost all types of child sexual abuse (Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse with the Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, 2020) – examples include having sexual conversations with children; ordering someone to sexually abuse a child in front of a webcam; communicating with a child with the intention of sexually abusing them in person later; and inciting a child to pose naked or perform sexual acts via video or live webcam.

Child sexual abuse involving technology may incorporate both online and 'in-person' aspects, with a fluidity between them; for example, in-person abuse of a child may be filmed, and then shown to the child online in order to blackmail or coerce them into further abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021).

There is a perception that child sexual abuse online takes place predominantly on the 'dark web', but most potentially harmful sexual interactions occur on 'open web' popular platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts/Meet, TikTok, 'X' (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube (Goharian et al, 2022).

Extent of child sexual abuse in online contexts

In a recent US survey, 16% of young adults aged 18–28 reported being sexually abused online before the age of 18; more than a third (36%) of these survivors said they had been abused by people aged 18–25, while one in seven (15%) described abuse by older adults (Finkelhor, Turner and Colburn, 2022).

While it is not generally possible to separate 'online' and 'offline' offending in police data, one-third (34%) of the 103,055 sexual offences against children recorded by the police across England and Wales in 2021/22 were imagery offences (Karsna and Bromley, 2023). However, the true extent of child sexual abuse in online contexts is likely to be far higher than the level reported to the police (Jay et al, 2022).

The evidence shows that the number of people accessing child sexual abuse imagery continues to grow (Jay et al, 2022). In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) detected child sexual abuse material in more than a quarter of a million web pages. Most sexual images of children reported to the IWF were 'self-generated' by children, often alone in their bedrooms, and captured (or 'capped') via a phone or computer camera; in many cases, these children had been groomed, deceived or extorted to produce and share the images (IWF, 2022).

Characteristics of adults who sexually abuse children in online contexts

A survey of children who had been sexually abused in person, with the abuse recorded for sharing online, found that those who abused them were commonly a parent, an acquaintance of the child or their family, or a person in a position of trust; the adults who abused in this way were mostly but not exclusively male (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017).

Another survey found that, where adults had asked or pressured children online to engage in sexual activity (e.g. providing images or having sexual conversations), the adult was already known to the child offline in most cases (Finkelhor, Turner and Colburn, 2022). Most sexual imagery of children is generated in the family home, by the child themselves or by a family member (Setter et al, 2021).

Most adults who view, share and/or produce sexual images of children are men from White ethnic backgrounds (DeMarco et al, 2018; Hamilton and Belton, 2022). In most cases where women produce child sexual abuse images, these are images of their own children (Bickart et al, 2019; Salter et al, 2021). There is evidence that some women who commit offences in online contexts are motivated by a sexual interest in children (Augarde and Rydon-Grange, 2022). Studies have found that most women who produce child sexual abuse material do so with their partners or other males (Bickart et al, 2019; Salter et al, 2021), and most of those who offend alone produce the material for men they know (Salter et al, 2021).

Generally, the most striking characteristic of men who view but do not produce sexual images of children is their 'ordinariness' (Prichard, Scanlan, Watters et al, 2022). Compared with men convicted of in-person sexual offences against children, they are less likely to have previous convictions, antisocial tendencies, substance abuse issues or severe mental illness, and more likely to be (or have been) married, well-educated and in employment (Babchishin et al, 2015).

Impacts of child sexual abuse in online contexts

The impacts of child sexual abuse in online contexts vary widely, and can be severe and lifelong (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Joleby et al, 2020; Jonsson et al, 2019; Whittle et al, 2013). It can lead to feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame, with children feeling that they participated in some way in the abuse (Quayle et al, 2023; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Leonard, 2010). It also makes victims vulnerable to further sexual abuse, for example when images are used to blackmail them (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017and 2021; Walsh and Tener, 2022).

When images of a child have been shared, there is the potential for the child to be revictimised over and over again, every time an image is watched, sent or received (ECPAT International, 2020). This impact can persist into adulthood, with victims/survivors reporting that they worry constantly about being recognised by a person who has viewed the material, and some have been recognised in this way (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Leonard, 2010). The ongoing availability of the material means that achieving 'closure' can be impossible (Leonard, 2010; Ost and Gillespie, 2018).

Supporting victims/survivors

Any child who has been sexually abused wants to be able to speak to people who believe them and know how to help them. It is important to provide supportive environments where children can confidently talk about their experiences and expect to receive support that will help them (Quayle et al, 2023; Phippen and Bond, 2022). Being asked about sexual abuse is important (Alaggia et al, 2019).

Many children who have been sexually abused in online contexts struggle to gain access to appropriate supportive interventions (Bond et al, 2018; Jay et al, 2022; Smith et al, 2015) – and if/when they do receive a response, they can feel that they get less support than victims of other forms of child sexual abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2017 and 2021). Research suggests that these victims are more often 'blamed' by professionals, who can see them as risk-taking or participating in the abuse in some way (Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2017 and 2021).

Furthermore, professionals may feel unable to help victims/survivors, as they are not 'experts' in the technology (Quayle et al, 2023; Slane et al, 2021); however, detailed knowledge of technology is not required to ask children about their experiences, and adults can ask children to show or explain things they do not understand. The value of relationship-based practice applies as much to children's use of technology as it does to other areas of practice (The Marie Collins Foundation and NWG Network, 2020).

Support should be responsive to each child's individual situation and needs, and it is important to consider the potential crossover between online and in-person child sexual abuse when deciding the most appropriate supportive response. It is vital that messaging from professionals does not blame victims/survivors. For more information on the ways professionals can effectively engage with young people and their families, see The Marie Collins Foundation's ***Online Sexual Harm Reduction Guide***; guidance on challenging direct and indirect victim-blaming language is available from the **UK Council for Internet Safety**.

Professionals should take steps to get child sexual abuse imagery removed by reporting it to the site, app or network hosting it, and to the **Internet Watch Foundation**. Children can use Childline's **Report Remove tool**, with the support of a trusted adult. This is a constructive development, but it's important to note this will not work for applications including WhatsApp because they use end-to-end encryption.

Pathways into child sexual abuse in online contexts

There are many different and complex pathways into the sexual abuse of children, as outlined in the CSA Centre's ***Key Messages from Research on Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrated by Adults***.

For all these pathways, people may not abuse if they do not have opportunities to do so. For example, compared with those who sexually abuse children in person, men who commit child sexual abuse imagery offences have been found to have more access to technology and less in-person access to children (Babchishin et al, 2015).

Online environments and technology provide easy access to sexual images of children, and to children themselves; this reduces obstacles to offending (Hamilton and Belton, 2022). Furthermore, people's inhibitions may be reduced by a sense that they are anonymous, the spaces they are using appear not to be monitored, and criminal activities seem unregulated (Steel et al, 2023).

Some adults may view or share sexual images of children as a substitute for different forms of sexual abuse; other motivations include curiosity, an obsessive compulsion to collect material, facilitation of social relationships, financial gain, thrill- or sensation-seeking, sexual arousal or interest, and/or 'avoiding real life' (Hamilton and Belton, 2022; Rimer, 2021).

Viewing sexual images of children may start in the absence of a sexual interest in children (Ly et al, 2018). It often starts during times of stress, difficulties with personal relationships, loneliness, substance or addition problems, or depression (Knack et al, 2020; Morgan and Lambie, 2019; Rimer, 2021).

A common pathway into viewing child sexual abuse imagery involves initially viewing legal pornography. Individuals report viewing more extreme material, and material depicting younger individuals, over time (Hamilton and Belton, 2022; Rimer and Holt, 2023). There is very little evidence of men viewing or possessing only child sexual abuse imagery (Steel et al, 2021; Wolak et al, 2011). Many men convicted of child sexual abuse imagery offences liken their behaviour to an addiction (Rimer and Holt, 2023; Seto et al, 2010).

Crossover with in-person child sexual abuse

It is rare for individuals convicted of viewing or sharing child sexual abuse material to be convicted subsequently of in-person sexual offences. However, their reconviction rates for *imagery-related* offences are higher, so the potential for reoffending should not be ignored (Elliott et al, 2019; Babchishin et al, 2022). Where adults commit sexual offences in person *and* online, in-person offences often predate offences in online contexts (Hamilton and Belton, 2022). The order in which men commit in-person and image related sexual offences seems to be relevant to risk and type of future offending (Babchishin et al, 2022), so it is important to take account of patterns in offending/viewing when carrying out risk assessments.

A study of individuals searching for child sexual abuse imagery on the dark web found that the self-reported likelihood of seeking direct contact with children after viewing that imagery was higher among those who viewed the imagery more frequently, were older when they started viewing it, viewed imagery depicting toddlers and infants, and/or had been in contact with other viewers of child sexual abuse imagery (Insoll et al, 2022).

Males convicted of image-based child sexual offences may be at increased risk of committing further offences if they actively participated in online communities related to child sexual abuse, distributed child sexual abuse material, have low self-control/self-regulation, show hostility or have thoughts that support offending (Hamilton and Belton, 2022).

Risk assessment and strategies for disruption

Structured risk-assessment tools such as the OASys Sexual Offence Predictor (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2020) can provide indications of adult males' likelihood of reoffending for both 'in-person' sexual offences and offences relating to sexual images of children (Brown, 2022). However, detailed individualised assessments are needed to identify risk and protective factors for each person, so that appropriate decisions can be made about safeguarding and the risk management plans needed.

A range of organisations, in the UK and internationally, disrupt online child sexual abuse using technology-based activities including peer-to-peer network monitoring, automated detection tools, web crawlers and facial recognition; many also conduct proactive investigations by sharing information and technology (Jay et al, 2022). As well as removing sexual images of children from online sites, these actions identify both victims and those who abuse them using technology. Although vast amounts of material continue to be removed and huge numbers of people identified, there has been limited published evaluation of these strategies (Edwards et al, 2021; Finkelhor, Walsh et al, 2022).

Prevention activities

Although it is recognised that preventing child sexual abuse in online contexts from happening in the first place must be a priority (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022), the focus of prevention has tended to be on children – including a focus on educating them to 'keep safe' – and an over-emphasis has been placed on 'stranger-danger' (Finkelhor, Walsh et al, 2022).

In the UK, organisations such as the Lucy Faithfull Foundation (LFF), the Safer Living Foundation and StopSO provide services to individuals struggling with inappropriate sexual thoughts and behaviours, although most of these have yet to be evaluated (see Perkins et al, 2018). A study of **Prevent It**, an internet-delivered, cognitive behavioural therapy programme, found that it reduced the viewing of child sexual abuse material by men recruited from forums on the dark web; participants reported they acquired useful tools and had feelings of hope (Lätth et al, 2022).

The LFF's **Stop It Now!** confidential helpline, email and live chat service offers support for anyone with concerns about child sexual abuse. In the UK and Ireland, around half of the contacts are from people concerned about their own behaviour, one in five of whom have solicited indecent images from a child (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022). An evaluation of Stop It Now! helplines in the UK/Ireland and the Netherlands found that they enabled people to better understand and manage their behaviour (Van Horn et al, 2015).

Stop It Now! also provides online self-directed learning guides. Over 170,000 people have accessed these, and independent evaluations show that a number changed their behaviours, with many no longer viewing images (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022).

Making online spaces 'safe by design'

Situational crime prevention theory stresses the importance of making online spaces less conducive for child sexual abuse – for example, by increasing the perceived risk of offending and limiting children's access to certain sites/areas (Smallbone and Wortley, 2017). Accordingly, the need for technology platforms and resources to be developed with 'safety by design' has been highlighted (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022; Jay et al, 2022).

Pop-up messages have deterred some individuals from visiting websites or uploading images (Prichard, Wortley et al, 2022, Prichard, Scanlan, Krone et al, 2022). The most effective messages state that IP addresses can be traced or that the material may be illegal, or offer a website to visit if users are worried about their use of pornography (Prichard, Scanlan, Watters et al, 2022; Prichard, Wortley et al, 2022).

Interventions with adults found to have sexually abused children in online contexts

Being investigated for or convicted of an image-related sexual offence may have a specific deterrent effect, with reoffending rates being low (Hamilton and Belton, 2022), although it should be noted that much offending goes unreported.

Interventions developed for men convicted of in-person sexual offences are not effective for individuals convicted of offences relating to child sexual abuse images (Elliott et al, 2019). The accredited offending behaviour programme iHorizon, delivered by HM Prison and Probation Service both in custody and in the community, was introduced in 2018 for individuals who have been convicted only of child sexual abuse imagery offences and are assessed as at medium reoffending risk and above. A recent evaluation of iHorizon (Elliott and Hambly, 2023) found that participants demonstrated positive progress across five treatment targets – managing life's problems, healthy relationships, healthy sexual interests, healthy thinking, and sense of purpose (desistance from crime) – although the absence of a control group meant that this progress could not be directly attributed to participation on the programme.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation's **Inform Plus** programme is for people who have been arrested, cautioned or convicted for online offences involving child sexual abuse imagery; it aims to help them explore their behaviour in a non-judgemental and supportive environment. Studies have found that participants experienced improvements in their social competency, emotion regulation, empathy, internet-related attitudes and general mental health after completing the programme (Gillespie et al, 2018), and were subsequently more able to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to offending (Dervley et al, 2017).

Safeguarding the children of people investigated for child sexual abuse in online contexts

When an adult is investigated by the police for child sexual abuse offences committed online, their partner and children can be traumatised by the initial police visit to the family home and the subsequent investigation; this trauma may persist for years. While it is important to investigate the offences and identify whether the adult has sexually abused their own children (or poses a direct risk to them), families commonly feel that some actions – such as conducting the initial visit when children are present, communicating poorly, and disseminating information about the offence carelessly – are needlessly distressing. Families face a long period of uncertainty, and feel that some professionals lack empathy (Armitage et al, 2023a and 2023b).

Conducting procedures with empathy and discretion is therefore important, along with being non-judgemental towards partners and families. Where children are present, support for them should be provided. It is also important for the police to leave information with the family, such as the ***Helpful Family Pack*** from the National Police Chiefs' Council, and follow up with them (Armitage et al, 2023a and 2023b). Information and advice for social workers, including in relation to the impacts on all the members of the family, is available in the CSA Centre's ***Managing Risk and Trauma after Online Sexual Offending: A Whole-family Safeguarding Guide***.

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