# Key messages from research **on harmful sexual behaviour in online contexts**

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# Key messages

Technology, online spaces and digital communication are now so embedded in children's daily activities that it is almost impossible to separate online interactions from other aspects of their social lives.

While not necessarily inappropriate, children's involvement in sexual behaviour through technology is complex. Often children will create images of themselves consensually as part of a sexual relationship, but some – particularly girls – share images because of coercion, sexual extortion or trafficking. Understanding children's exposure to and experiences of viewing pornography can improve understanding of their sexual behaviour.

Online spaces provide opportunities for constant and instant response, anonymity, and an emphasis on 'likes, fans and followers', which can encourage disinhibition. Children may be particularly vulnerable to sexual harm in these environments if they are lonely or socially isolated, have special educational needs, or are seeking to understand aspects of their identity and connect with people like them.

The impact of sexual harm in online contexts varies widely, and can be severe and lifelong: if images of a child have been shared, for example, the child is revictimised each time they are viewed. It can lead to feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame, and can make children vulnerable to further sexual harm.

Children who have been sexually harmed in online contexts want to be able to speak to people who believe them and know how to help them, but they report that they receive less support than victims of 'in-person' sexual harm. They may feel responsible for the harm they have experienced, or fear they will get into trouble for having sent images or gone online; these concerns can discourage them from seeking help.

Professionals often feel unable to help these children because they do not consider themselves 'experts' in the technology, but the skills that professionals need to support and protect children in this context are the same core skills that they use to respond to any form of child abuse: relationship-based practice, talking to children and accepting what they say.

Interventions should be individually developed in line with children's competencies, and should encourage parental involvement; language that may be interpreted as victim-blaming should be avoided. Simply restricting or limiting children's access to devices will not be effective, as this can make them feel isolated, different from their peers, and vulnerable. Criminalising victims/survivors and those who have been coerced into activities by others should be avoided.

The sexual harm of children in online contexts is often carried out by people known to the victim, such as family members, friends or acquaintances. In one study, almost a third of survivors of online sexual harm said they had been harmed by other children.

Education programmes to prevent harmful sexual behaviour by children can be effective, but they need to involve both the school and the wider community, incorporate various approaches, involve repeated reminders and follow-ups, and actively engage children.

In determining appropriate interventions for children who have harmed in online contexts, professionals need to assess the full range of the child's behaviours – both online and offline – and to try to understand the reasons for them.

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.

The internet and technology-based communications are now embedded in the daily lives of both adults and children, to such an extent that it is hard to imagine what life would be like without them. They bring freedom and opportunity, but also risk and the potential for harm; digital technology can feature in almost all types of child sexual abuse.

This paper brings together learning from existing research on children's use of digital communications technology and the internet – through social media, text messaging, online gaming, message boards, streaming, etc – in relation to this technology's role in their sexual behaviour and the potential for them to be sexually harmed or sexually harm others through its use.

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

**By 'parent' we mean someone in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child; this may be their biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative fulfilling that role.**

**We use 'sexual harm' to mean the harm caused to a child by an adult's sexual abuse or another child's sexual behaviour; note that the harm itself may not all be of a sexual nature.**

This paper is designed to be read alongside *Key Messages from Research on Child Sexual Abuse by Adults in Online Contexts* and *Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour*, both published by the CSA Centre.

# The role of online spaces and digital technology in children's sexual behaviour, including harmful behaviour

Almost all children in the UK have access to the internet and various forms of communications technology: nine in 10 children own their own mobile phone by the age of 11 (Ofcom, 2022). While they have been 'born into an online world', and often appear more skilled than adults in using digital technology, this does not necessarily mean that they are equipped to navigate online environments safely (Livingstone et al, 2017).

In a recent survey, 16% of young adults in the USA said they had been sexually harmed online before the age of 18, mostly by family members, friends or acquaintances. Among these victims/survivors, almost one-third (30%) said other children had sexually harmed them online; in cases of 'nonconsensual sexting' (defined in that survey as the nonconsensual sharing of images and the nonconsensual taking or production of images), almost half (47%) of victims/survivors said that under-18s had been responsible (Finkelhor, Turner and Colborn, 2022).

The majority of potentially harmful online sexual interactions occur on a wide range of 'open web' popular platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts/Meet, TikTok, 'X' (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube (Goharian et al, 2022).

The term 'harmful sexual behaviour' has been used to describe sexual behaviour by under-18s that is "developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful to self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult" (Hackett et al, 2019). The CSA Centre's *Key Messages from Research on Children and Young People Who Display Harmful Sexual Behaviour* summarises research findings relating to a range of behaviours – both online and offline – and those who engage in them.

# Sharing images online

Children can legally consent to sexual behaviours *in person* from the age of 16, but sharing an image of a child (under 18) is a criminal offence. This creates difficulties for children for whom consensually sharing images is part of their everyday experiences (Bond, 2014; Phippen, 2016). It can lead to children being blamed and criminalised for consensually sharing images that are later used to victimise them.

There are a wide range of reasons why children share imagery of themselves. Most commonly, it is voluntarily shared – for example, as a way of indicating that they like someone, for fun, or as part of a sexual relationship (Katz and El Asam, 2020; Baines, 2018). However, some children, particularly girls, feel pressure to send images, or do so because they worry the other person will lose interest in them if they don't (Revealing Reality, 2022a). Around one in five children share images because of coercion, sexual extortion, or trafficking (Baines, 2018). Research suggests that, when images of children are obtained and used for extortion, boys may be more likely than girls to be extorted for money (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2022) while girls are commonly extorted for more images (Baines, 2018). This reinforces the importance of recognising each individual's motivation for and experience of both sharing and receiving images.

Regarding the criminal justice response to children's consensual sharing of self-generated images, the Home Office introduced 'Outcome 21' – where further investigation is not in the public interest – in 2016. This gives the police discretion in these circumstances to record a crime as having taken place but for no formal criminal justice action to be taken. In 2021/22, a quarter (7,620) of all sexual abuse image-related investigations concluded with this outcome (Karsna and Bromley, 2023). There is, however, a risk that the information recorded will be disclosed later in enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, with significant consequences for children's future employment and career opportunities (Bond and Phippen, 2019; Phippen and Bond, 2020).

## Impacts of sharing images

While many children report that the consensual sharing of images in relationships often results in no harm and has many positives for them (Katz and El Asam, 2020), there is concern about what might happen to the images in the future.

Some research highlights the gendered nature of the harm inflicted on personal reputation: for example, studies have found that young people ridicule and judge girls who share photos of themselves, while boys who do so are socially rewarded (Ringrose et al, 2012; Stanley et al, 2018; Project deSHAME, 2017). This is particularly damaging in more traditional or religious communities (Stanley et al, 2018). One study found that girls from less privileged backgrounds, and children who were less confident about their appearance, had the worst experiences of image-sharing because the images were used to shame or bully them (Revealing Reality, 2022a).

When images of a child have been shared non-consensually, 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, indeed, some have been recognised in this way (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Leonard, 2010).

# Viewing pornography

Most children first view pornography unintentionally, and many are 'grossed out' and 'confused' by what they see (Children's Commissioner, 2023; Revealing Reality, 2020). One study found that intentionally viewing pornography before the age of 13 may act as a trigger for in-person harmful sexual behaviour (Hollis and Belton, 2017). Some children have a preoccupation with viewing pornography, and a proportion view violent and/ or illegal pornography – including child sexual abuse material – which appears to be associated with frequent pornography use (Hollis and Belton, 2017).

Much pornography includes significant levels of violent, sexist and racist content (Carrotte et al, 2020; Fritz et al, 2020; Shor and Golriz, 2019; Shor and Seida, 2019). Gendered aggression is amplified in pornography featuring young females, which children may seek out due to their age similarity (Shor, 2019; Vannier et al, 2014). It rarely depicts relational intimacy, safe sex, or the negotiation of consent (Antevska and Gavey, 2015; Lim et al, 2016; Vannier et al, 2014).

Many children feel that pornography affects their expectations and behaviour during sex, particularly copying rough or forceful sex (Children's Commissioner, 2023; Revealing Reality, 2020). They are concerned about the impact on their understanding of the difference between sexual pleasure and harm, and girls report that pornography is an important contributor to their experiences of unpleasant, painful, risky and coerced sexual acts (Children's Commissioner, 2023; Marston and Lewis, 2014; Rothman et al, 2015; Walker et al, 2015).

There is an association between exposure to both non-violent and violent pornography and the likelihood of engaging in harmful sexual behaviour (Mori et al, 2023). However, it is not possible to identify a causal link between these activities: not all children who view pornography engage in harmful sexual behaviour, and vice versa (Hollis and Belton, 2017).

## Working with children who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour online

A limited number of studies have examined the extent of 'technology-assisted' harmful sexual behaviour in England and Wales (Hollis and Belton, 2017; Vaswani et al, 2022), but it had been engaged in by nearly half of children assessed in 2017 for the NSPCC's 'Turn the Page' harmful sexual behaviour treatment service (Hollis and Belton, 2017). In 2020/21, there was a large increase in the number of children contacting the Lucy Faithfull Foundation for advice and support, including 155 who had committed a sexual offence online (Jay et al, 2022).

Studies suggest that children who engage in harmful sexual behaviour in online contexts are predominantly White boys (Hollis and Belton, 2017; Vaswani et al, 2022). A study of children referred to the Turn the Page service (see above) found that girls had mostly been involved in creating sexual images of children – including of themselves – whereas the boys had engaged in a far wider range of online behaviours (Hollis and Belton, 2017).

Boys whose harmful sexual behaviour takes place solely in online contexts have been found to have different backgrounds and characteristics from those who also display harmful sexual behaviour in person: they are typically older at the time of referral to services, have experienced less trauma, have fewer mental health or behavioural difficulties, come from more stable family backgrounds, and perform better at school (Belton and Hollis, 2016; Hollis and Belton, 2017).

It is common for children to engage in more than one type of harmful sexual behaviour, so it is important to get a detailed understanding of a child's behaviours, both online and in person (Allotey and Swann, 2019).

A developmental perspective should be taken in assessing behaviours and the motivations for them. Characteristics that are traditionally viewed as strengths, such as family stability or engagement in education, may not be mitigating factors for online behaviours, so it is important not to make assumptions. Different motivations will require different interventions, which should be individualised and holistic, providing guidance and support to the child, their parents/carers and their networks, alongside specific therapeutic intervention for the child if appropriate (Allotey and Swann, 2019).

For practical guidance on conducting assessments and working with children who have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour online, see *Technology-assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour: Practice Guidance (2nd edition),* produced by the AIM Project and the NSPCC.

# Children's vulnerability to sexual harm in online contexts

Some aspects of online spaces cause many children to feel more at risk of harm and abuse. The opportunity for constant and instant response, anonymity, and an emphasis placed on 'likes, fans and followers' can all lead users – whether adults or children – to disinhibition (Project deSHAME, 2017).

Research suggests that there are a wide range of overlapping factors relating to vulnerability to sexual harm in online contexts. Having previously been abused – particularly where the abuse was sexual – increases a child's vulnerability to sexual harm online, as does experience of other adversity such as family homelessness, parental unemployment, being removed from the family, parental incarceration, and parental substance use (Turner et al, 2023). There is also increased vulnerability among:

- girls and disabled children, who are more vulnerable than other children to sexual abuse generally (UNICEF, 2017)

- children with special educational needs – this may be because their desire to maintain friendships, or difficulty in reflecting on the consequences of certain actions, makes it easier for others to take advantage of them (Revealing Reality, 2022b)

- children who are depressed or experiencing mental health difficulties, those who are out of school, and those from poorer households and/or marginalised groups (UNICEF, 2017)

- lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, and those identifying as transgender or questioning/queer, who may go online to try to understand their sexual orientation or gender identity and connect with people like them (Goharian et al, 2022; UNICEF, 2017; Setter et al, 2021)

- lonely or socially isolated children, who may spend more time online as they seek friendship and acceptance (Katz and El Asam, 2020; Livingstone et al, 2017; Revealing Reality, 2022b).

# Support for children who have been sexually harmed in online contexts

The impact on children of sexual harm in online contexts can be severe, and varies widely among victims/survivors (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Joleby et al, 2020; Jonsson et al, 2019; Whittle et al, 2013); see also the 'Sharing images online' section above. They may have increased feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame, and a sense of responsibility because they feel they participated in some way (Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Leonard, 2010).

In many cases, children do not initially turn to adults if they encounter problems in online contexts; they turn instead to their friends and peers (Ofcom, 2022), or tell nobody at all (Wolak et al, 2018). They fear they will get into trouble for sending images or going online, or think professionals do not understand the issues sufficiently (Truth Project, 2022; Phippen and Phippen, 2018). When they do disclose, they report that they do not get the same level of support as children who are sexually harmed 'in person', because adults may perceive that they took risks or participated in the harm (Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2017 and 2021).

Children may also fear they will have devices taken from them as a way of stopping the harm. Such fears are often justified, as protective adults are typically risk-averse and prohibitive in their approach to children's use of technology (Quayle and Cariola, 2019; Phippen and Phippen, 2018). Since children value their online lives, it is unhelpful and potentially counter-productive to give them negative, restrictive, scary, alarmist and avoidance-based messages. Similarly, restricting or removing access to devices will not be effective, as it makes children feel isolated, different from their peers, and vulnerable (Phippen and Bond, 2020; Beckett et al, 2019; Lloyd, 2020; UNICEF, 2017). This type of response also contributes to concerns of victim-blaming, as does the language often used in responding to the child (UK Council for Internet Safety, 2022).

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 in which children feel able to talk about the harm caused to them through technology and are confident that they will be supported appropriately (Phippen and Bond, 2022). Children also want professionals to keep them informed about the procedures to be followed, share important information, and explain what is going to happen next; they expect the police to provide reassurance and respond appropriately (including by stopping image-sharing and removing images), safely, quickly and with few repercussions (Quayle and Cariola, 2019).

In some cases, children may not know that they were being harmed or recorded in some way, may be too embarrassed to tell anyone about it, or may have complex circumstances with little support (The Marie Collins Foundation and NWG Network, 2020). The supportive response should be child-centred and individualised, featuring effective engagement with the whole family, and professionals should involve the child in decision-making processes (The Marie Collins Foundation and NWG Network, 2020).

Professionals should take steps to get sexual imagery removed, by reporting it to the site, app or network hosting it and by contacting the **Internet Watch Foundation** (IWF). Children can use Childline's **Report Remove tool**, with the support of a trusted adult. This is a positive development, but it's important to note that this tool will not work currently for content on apps such as WhatsApp because they use end-to-end encryption.

# Helping children in their use of technology and online spaces

Professionals can feel that they are unable to help children in relation to technology-based sexual activity such as the production of self-generated images, as they themselves are not experts in technology (Slane et al, 2021); however, detailed knowledge of technology is not required to talk to children about their experiences, and adults can ask children to show or explain things they do not understand.

Children are less likely to suffer harm if, in addition to talking to them about their world offline, their parents and carers have open and honest conversations with them about their online lives (Katz and El Asam, 2020; Revealing Reality, 2022b). The value of relationship-based practice applies as much to children's online activity as to other areas of practice (The Marie Collins Foundation and NWG Network, 2020).

Children commonly feel that it is their responsibility to protect themselves from sexual harm online, and this inhibits them from seeking help if they experience that harm (Beckett et al, 2019). It is therefore essential that messages around the use of technology are nuanced, and direct or indirect victim-blaming is avoided (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022; Beckett et al, 2019). General messaging for children around sexual behaviour online should:

- ▸ stress that children should expect to experience difficulties online, and explain how to seek help and support when this happens (Phippen and Bond, 2022)

- ▸ emphasise people's responsibility not to harm others or share images non-consensually, rather than preventing *any* sharing of sexual imagery (Beckett et al, 2019; Phippen and Bond, 2020; Lloyd, 2020)

- ▸ help children to respond to online sexual harm by acquaintances and peers, which is more common than online sexual abuse by adult strangers (Beckett et al, 2019; Finkelhor et al, 2021; Finkelhor, Walsh et al, 2022)

- ▸ acknowledge and enable children's critical thinking (Phippen and Bond, 2020), particularly around broader topics of respect in sexual relationships, coercion and consent, personal boundaries and pornography (Albury et al, 2017)

- ▸ avoid 'siloed' messages that overlook the similarities and overlaps between online and offline behaviours (Finkelhor et al, 2021).

Many children use false dates of birth or ages to register for online resources, circumvent parental controls, or use proxy servers (Jay et al, 2022; Revealing Reality, 2022b). Online companies consistently underestimate the numbers of underage users on their platforms and the volume of harmful content to which children are exposed (Children's Commissioner, 2022). The need for platforms and online resources to be designed with safety in mind, referred to as 'safety by design', and for more prevention efforts by technology companies, has been stressed (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Media, 2022; Jay et al, 2022).

# Education programmes around sexual behaviour in online contexts

It is important to acknowledge children's stage of development when deciding the type of education to give them. Children emphasise the importance of receiving education before they start spending time online, which means starting in primary school (Beckett et al, 2019).

Children describe a need for education about online sexual harm to acknowledge the legitimacy of their developing sexuality during adolescence and the ways in which this might play out in the online world, and to help them recognise the boundaries between normal and harmful sexual interactions (Beckett et al, 2019).

A UK-wide survey found that children were more likely to receive education about sex and online safety than education on how to have positive relationships online and develop relationship skills (McGeeney and Hanson, 2017). Fewer children felt that they had received good *relationship* education compared to online *safety* education, which most children rated highly (McGeeney and Hanson, 2017).

Another study found that some boys felt unable to talk about issues in relation to sexual behaviour online or ask for help; that the issues facing them were not taken as seriously as those facing girls; and that boys received less education than girls on this subject (Young Scot, 2019).

Education programmes to prevent harmful sexual behaviour can work (Finkelhor et al, 2021; Finkelhor, Walsh et al, 2022; Walsh et al, 2022), and there are studies that have explored their value from children's perspectives. While there is not yet strong research evidence about programmes aimed at preventing engagement in harmful sexual behaviour online, much can be learned from research into programmes to prevent online bullying (Finkelhor, Walsh et al, 2022). This includes:

‣ using multiple and varied methods of engaging children and promoting learning

‣ repeating messages through lessons, reminders and follow-ups

‣ actively engaging children with each other via communication and role-plays

‣ including whole-school or community-level involvement

‣ encouraging parental involvement via activity suggestions provided to parents

‣ including skills components related to problem-solving, assertiveness, resistance to peer pressure, empathy and perspective-taking, self-regulation and impulse control, conflict resolution and de-escalation, help-seeking, bystander mobilisation, and sex education.

These elements have been incorporated into 'In the Picture', a resource that aims to minimise the harms of pornography by using participatory learning methods to build secondary school pupils' capacity to critique pornography's messages (Crabbe, 2014). A framework, guidelines and toolkit, available via the **It's Time We Talked** website, have been implemented in schools in Australia and New Zealand and are being evaluated (Crabbe and Flood, 2021).

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