



# Responding to technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour

**This guide is intended to support professional judgement. It does not replace your education setting's safeguarding policy or statutory guidance.**

## 1. What is technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour?

'Harmful sexual behaviour' describes sexual behaviour by children aged under 18 that is developmentally inappropriate and may be harmful to the child and/or to others (whether children or adults). *Technology-assisted* harmful sexual behaviour occurs when digital tools – such as social media, messaging apps, gaming platforms, webcams or mobile devices – are used to perpetrate, facilitate or record that behaviour.

The term covers behaviour including:

- the sharing or soliciting of sexual images of children (including self-generated images)
- sexual coercion, harassment or extortion online
- the non-consensual distribution of intimate images
- the creation and/or distribution of AI-generated or manipulated sexual images of children
- viewing or distributing child sexual abuse material.

The majority of these interactions occur on mainstream platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube.

**Technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour is not rare:** one study found that it was present in nearly half of children assessed by one specialist harmful sexual behaviour treatment service. Children displaying harmful sexual behaviour commonly engage in multiple types, both online and in person.

**Most technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour involves children known to each other.** This matters for how you understand and frame your response to concerns and incidents.

## 2. Why does it require a specific response?

Child victims of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour, and of technology-assisted sexual abuse by adults, consistently report that they receive less support than children harmed in person – and that professionals do not recognise the impact of what has happened to them. These children may feel responsible for the harm they have experienced, because they had an online presence. The potential for shared images to be viewed repeatedly means that harm can be ongoing and severe. This is not a lesser form of child sexual abuse because it has happened online: it requires the same serious, relationship-based response as any other form.

The skills needed to respond effectively are not technical. They are the same core skills required for any form of child sexual abuse: building relationships, talking to children, and accepting what they tell you.

### 3. Which children typically engage in this behaviour?

Children who display technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour are predominantly boys; one study found that those referred for treatment were typically older at the time of referral than children referred for 'in-person' harmful sexual behaviour.

They may come from more stable family backgrounds, with fewer adverse childhood experiences than those who display harmful sexual behaviour in person. Traditional protective factors such as school engagement or family stability are not reliably mitigating for online behaviours.

Girls involved in technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour are most likely to have been involved in creating sexual images, including of themselves, often under coercion.

Where a child has used pornography, this warrants attention in assessment, but the relationship between viewing pornography and harmful sexual behaviour is not straightforward or causal.

### 4. Which children are more vulnerable to experiencing this behaviour?

While any child may experience harmful sexual behaviour (or sexual abuse by adults) in online contexts, children may be particularly vulnerable if they:

- are socially isolated or lonely
- have special educational needs or disabilities
- are exploring/questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity
- are experiencing depression or poor mental health
- are from marginalised groups, including in relation to their ethnicity.

### 5. What to do when an incident comes to your attention

#### Immediate steps for all staff

If you have a concern about a child, you are probably the professional best placed to speak to them about it. Any concern that a child has been harmed, or has harmed another child, should be referred to your setting's **designated safeguarding lead/professional** without delay. Record what has been seen, heard or reported factually and accurately.

**Do not view, download, share or print any sexual images of children**, even as evidence; this is a criminal offence under the Protection of Children Act 1978. Preserve devices in their current state, and handle them in line with your local police and local authority designated officer (LADO) guidance.

If you are concerned that a child is a victim of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour, do not remove or restrict their access to devices as a default response – this can make them feel isolated and reduce their willingness to seek help in future. It's important, though, to ask them not to delete any content, as devices and accounts may be relevant to any subsequent police investigation.

If child sexual abuse images or videos are involved, this must be reported to the police. Make a report to the [Internet Watch Foundation](#) to begin the process of getting the images or videos removed from the internet. Children can use Childline's [Report Remove](#) tool with a trusted adult's support, but this tool does not work for end-to-end encrypted apps such as WhatsApp.

## The role of the designated safeguarding lead/professional

The designated safeguarding lead/professional must assess whether an incident meets the **threshold for referral** to children's social care (under sections 17 or 47 of the Children Act 1989) and/or the police, in line with local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour should be assessed in the same way as any other form of harmful sexual behaviour, with reference to the full range of the child's online and offline behaviours – not just the presenting incident.

Where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, the designated safeguarding lead/professional must immediately make a referral to children's social care. For incidents that do not meet the section 47 threshold, consider whether an early help assessment, a child in need referral (section 17) or an internal safeguarding response is most appropriate. Consider too whether a LADO referral is required if a staff member or volunteer is involved.

## 6. Supporting a child who has been harmed

Child victims of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour often feel that they caused the harm by being online, or that they consented because they shared an image. **This is never the case.** Take the incident seriously from the outset: children harmed online consistently report that professionals do not recognise the impact, and that they receive less support than children harmed in person.

The CSA Centre's [Communicating with Children Guide](#) can support you in talking to the child. During your initial conversation:

- Ask about their experience of technology so you can understand things from their perspective. For example, you might say: *"Can you help me understand what was happening? I want to make sure I get this right."* This signals that you are trying to understand, not judge.
- Be explicit that the abuse is not their fault, even if they initially consented to some contact, shared images, or visited a site they should not have. Avoid any framing that implies they could have stopped things earlier.
- Do not wait for a complete disclosure before taking action. Children who have been harmed online may minimise what happened, may not have words for it, and may not initially describe it in terms that sound serious.
- Be honest about what happens next. Children want to know what procedures will be followed, what will happen to their information, and what the school and police will do. Uncertainty increases distress. Ensure the child knows what will happen next and is **involved in decision-making** where it is safe to do so.
- **If images have been shared**, acknowledge this directly. The potential for images to circulate is a particular source of ongoing fear and shame. Help the child access Childline's [Report Remove](#) tool, and support them through that process. Explain that steps are being taken to limit sharing, even if you cannot guarantee removal.

Consider the child's mental health and emotional needs, including the risk of secondary trauma from knowing that images may continue to be viewed. For information about supporting the child's emotional wellbeing, see the CSA Centre's [Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway](#). Refer the child to specialist support services where needed.

## Actions to avoid

- **Don't** use **victim-blaming** language or suggest in any way that the child's actions contributed to the harm. Do not remind them about the law or that they have been taught how to stay safe online; they are likely to interpret and experience this as victim-blaming.

Victim blaming is any language or action that implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that a person is partially or wholly responsible for abuse that has happened to them. It is harmful and can wrongfully place responsibility, shame or blame onto a victim, making them feel that they are complicit or responsible for the harm they have experienced.

One of the greatest barriers to a child seeking help and reporting online abuse, is feeling they are to blame for something that has happened to them. Blaming children and young people for their own abuse is never acceptable.

- **Don't** refer to **'the real world'** as distinct from online life. For the children you work with, online spaces are a genuine and significant part of their social and emotional lives. Language that implies otherwise signals that you do not understand their experience and that they cannot trust you to help.
- **Don't** treat the incident as **primarily a technology problem**. Platform settings and parental controls have a role, but the core response is a safeguarding response, not a technical one. You do not need to be a technology expert: the skills that enable a good response to any form of child abuse (building relationships, listening, believing children) are exactly the skills needed here.

## 7. Responding to a child who has displayed technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour

A child who has displayed technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour must still be treated as a child with their own welfare needs. They may themselves have experienced abuse or adversity, and a safeguarding response should be considered to explore this.

Begin with a **holistic assessment** which covers the child's online and offline behaviours, their relationships, and their history, trauma and motivations. Do not draw conclusions from the presenting incident alone. Do not assume that a stable background or good educational attainment means that the behaviour is less serious or that intervention is not needed.

Interventions must be **proportionate, individualised and holistic**. They should involve the child's parents as active partners who need support to understand what has happened and how to respond. You may consider making a referral to a specialist service.

Avoid criminalising children who have been coerced into activities, or whose behaviour reflects developmentally normal sexual exploration which has been inappropriately facilitated by technology.

The CSA Centre's resource [\*Safety planning in education: A guide for professionals supporting children following incidents of harmful sexual behaviour\*](#) can help to guide your thinking and decision making.

## 8. Prevention and the curriculum

Under the UK Government's [RSHE Statutory Guidance \(2025\)](#), all secondary schools must ensure that pupils receive education covering online safety, consent, healthy relationships, the law on image-sharing (including AI-generated images), and how to seek help. However, education should begin *before* children spend significant time online, starting in primary school.

Prevention programmes are more effective when they:

- are long-term
- actively involve children in discussion
- address relationships and respect alongside safety and risk
- engage your setting's culture and policy
- include parents.

Education programmes framed primarily around threat and restriction are less effective than those that help children develop critical thinking about relationships, consent, coercion and healthy online routines.

The curriculum should challenge the idea that online sexual harassment and other harmful behaviour is normal. Where misogyny, sexual comments, image-sharing and pressure to send or to request images are treated as ordinary behaviour, your setting's response to individual incidents will have limited impact. A consistent, whole setting commitment to challenging these norms is essential.

## 9. Key contacts and resources

The **CSA Centre** has produced a range of [practice resources](#) to help education professionals identify concerns of child sexual abuse or harmful sexual behaviour and respond appropriately.

The **Marie Collins Foundation** provides [resources and support](#) for professionals working with children harmed by technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour, in addition to resources and support for children and parents.

The **NSPCC** offers information, advice and resources on [keeping children safe online](#), covering topics such as understanding children's online activity, starting family conversations about online safety, and taking measures to protect children from online harms. It also provides a helpline (**0808 800 5000**) for professionals and other adults who have concerns about children's safety.

The **Lucy Faithful Foundation's** [SHORE](#) website is a safe, anonymous place for children and young people to get help and support (including by email and online chat), with the aim of preventing harmful sexual behaviour.

The [AIM Project](#) provides assessment and intervention guidance for professionals working with children who have displayed technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour.

The **National Crime Agency's** [CEOP](#) website contains advice on reporting online sexual abuse (including harmful sexual behaviour), as well as resources for professionals and age-specific information for children aged between four and 18 years old.

The [Internet Watch Foundation](#) can take action to remove child sexual abuse images and videos from the internet. Children can also use **Childline's** [Report Remove](#) tool, with a trusted adult's support.