

E-Safety: Children Exposed to Abuse through the Digital Media

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1. Definition

'Internet Abuse' relates to four main areas of abuse to children:

- Sharing and production of abusive images of children (although these are not confined to the internet);
- A child or young person being groomed online for the purpose of Sexual Abuse;
- Exposure to pornographic images and other offensive material via the internet; and
- The use of the internet, and in particular social media sites, to engage children in extremist ideologies or to promote gang related violence.

The term digital (data carrying signals carrying electronic or optical pulses) and interactive (a message relates to other previous message/s and the relationship between them) technology covers a range of electronic tools. These are constantly being upgraded and their use has become more widespread as the internet can be accessed easily on mobile / smart phones, laptops, computers, tablets and games consoles.

Social networking sites are often used by perpetrators as an easy way to access children and young people for sexual abuse. In addition radical and extremist groups may use social networking to attract children and young people into rigid and narrow ideologies that are intolerant of diversity: this is similar to the grooming process and exploits the same vulnerabilities.

Internet abuse may also include cyber-bullying or online bullying (see **Bullying Procedure**). This is when a child is tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child using the internet and/or mobile devices. In the case of online bullying it is possible for one victim to be bullied by many perpetrators. In any case of

severe bullying it may be appropriate to consider the behaviour as child abuse by another young person.

Sexting is a term used when a person shares sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others, or sends sexually explicit messages. They can be sent using mobiles, tablets, smartphones, laptops - any device that allows you to share media and messages.

Sexting can be seen as harmless, but creating or sharing explicit images of a child is illegal, even if the person doing it is a child. A young person is breaking the law if they:

- Take an explicit photo or video of themselves or a friend;
- Share an explicit image or video of a child, even if it's shared between children of the same age;
- Possess, download or store an explicit image or video of a child, even if the child gave their permission for it to be created.

However, if a young person is found creating or sharing images, the police can choose to record that a crime has been committed but that taking formal action is not in the public interest (see [Briefing note: Police action in response to youth produced sexual imagery \('Sexting'\)](#))

E-Safety is the generic term that refers to raising awareness about how children, young people and adults can protect themselves when using digital technology and in the online environment, and provides examples of interventions that can reduce the level of risk for children and young people.

The chapters relating to **Complex (Organised or Multiple) Abuse Procedure** and **Allegations Against Persons who Work with Children Procedure** should be borne in mind depending on the circumstances of the concerns.

2. Risks

There is some evidence from research that people found in possession of indecent images/pseudo images or films/videos of children may currently, or in the future become, involved directly in child Abuse themselves.

In particular, an individual's access to children should be established during the assessment and Section 47 investigation to consider the possibility that they may be actively involved in the abuse of children including those within the family, within employment contexts or in other settings such as voluntary work with children or other positions of trust.

Any indecent, obscene image involving a child has, by its very nature, involved a person, who in creating that image, has been party to abusing that child.

3. Indicators

Often issues involving child abuse come to light through an accidental discovery of images on a computer or other device and can seem to emerge 'out of the blue' from an otherwise trusted and non-suspicious individual. This in itself can make accepting the fact of the abuse difficult for those who know and may have trusted that individual. Partners, colleagues and friends often find it very difficult to believe and may require support.

The initial indicators of child abuse are likely to be changes in behaviour and mood of the child victim. Clearly such changes can also be attributed to many innocent events in a child's life and cannot be regarded as diagnostic. However changes to a child's circle of friends or a noticeable change in attitude towards the use of computer or phone could have their origin in abusive behaviour. Similarly a change in their friends or not wanting to be alone with a particular person may be a sign that something is upsetting them.

Children often show us rather than tell us that something is upsetting them. There may be many reasons for changes in their behaviour, but if we notice a combination of worrying signs it may be time to call for help or advice.

4. Protection and Action to be Taken

Accessing or Creating Indecent Images

Where there is suspected or actual evidence of anyone accessing or creating indecent images of children, this must be shared with the Police and Children's social care in line with the **Referrals Procedure**.

Online Grooming

Where there is a safeguarding concern about a child being exposed to pornographic material or information about a child being groomed, or contacted by someone inappropriately, via the internet or other ICT tools like a mobile phone, referrals should be made to the Police and to Children's Social Care in line with the **Referrals Procedure**.

The [Serious Crime Act \(2015\)](#) introduced an offence of 'sexual communication with a child'. This applies to an adult, who communicates with a child and where the communication is sexual or, if it is intended to elicit from the child a communication, which is sexual and the adult reasonably believes the child to be under 16 years of age. The Act also amended the Sex Offences Act 2003 so it is now an offence for an adult to arrange to meet with someone

under 16 having communicated with them on just one occasion, previously it was on at least two occasions.

All such reports should be taken seriously. Referrals will normally lead to a Strategy Discussion to determine the course of further investigation, enquiry and assessment. Any intervention should be continually under review especially if further evidence comes to light.

Due to the nature of this type of abuse and the possibility of the destruction of evidence, the referrer should discuss their concerns with the Police and Children's Social Care before raising the matter with the family. This will enable a joint decision to be made about informing the family and ensuring that the child's welfare is safeguarded.

Extremist Material

Where there are concerns in relation to a child's exposure to extremist materials, the child's school may be able to provide advice and support: all schools are required to identify a Prevent Single Point of Contact (SPOC) who is the lead for safeguarding in relation to protecting individuals from radicalisation and involvement in terrorism.

Suspected online terrorist material can be reported through [Report online material promoting terrorism or extremism \(GOV.UK\)](#). Reports can be made anonymously, although practitioners should not do so as they must follow procedures for professionals. Content of concern can also be reported directly to social media platforms – see [Safety features on Social Networks](#).

5. Issues

When communicating via the internet, young people tend to become less wary and talk about things far more openly than they might when communicating face to face.

Both male and female adults and some young people may use the internet to harm children. Some do this by looking at, taking and/or distributing photographs and video images on the internet of children naked, in sexual poses and/or being sexually abused.

Children and young people should be supported to understand that when they use digital technology they should not give out personal information, particularly their name, address or school, mobile phone numbers to anyone they do not know or trust: this particularly includes social networking and online gaming sites. If they have been asked for such information, they should always check with their parent or other trusted adult before providing such details. It is also important that they understand why they must take a parent or trusted adult with them if they meet someone face to face whom they have only previously met online.

Children and young people should be warned about the risks of taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves and sharing them on the internet or by text. It is essential, therefore, that young people understand the legal implications and the risks they are taking. The initial risk posed by sexting may come from peers, friends and others in their social network who may share the images. However, once an image has been sent, it can then be shared with others or posted online. The Criminal Justice and Courts Act (2015) introduced the offence of Revenge Porn where intimate images are shared with the intent to cause distress to the specific victim.

Where young people are voluntarily sending / sharing sexual images or content with one another the Police are likely to use the 'outcome 21' recording code to record that a crime has been committed but that it is not considered to be in the public interest to take criminal action against the people involved. This reduces stigma and distress for children and help to minimise the long term impact of the situation. (See, [College of Policing, Briefing Note, Police action in response to youth produced sexual imagery \('Sexting'\)](#)).

In some cases adults may also groom a young persons into sending such images which can then be used to blackmail and ensnare them – see **Safeguarding Children and Young People from Child Sexual Exploitation Procedure**.

Further Information

Please see:

- [Child Safety Online: A practical guide for parents and carers whose children are using social media \(GOV.UK\)](#);
- [Childnet International, Advice on Sexting](#);
- [Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence \(Catch 22\)](#);
- [Coram children's legal centre](#);

LawStuff is run by Coram Children's Legal Centre and gives free legal information to young people on a range of different issues. See Children's rights in the digital world in particular.

Behaviour that is illegal if committed offline is also illegal if committed online. It is recommended that legal advice is sought in the event of an online issue or situation. There are a number of pieces of legislation that may apply including:

- [CEOP, Thinkuknow](#);
- [Disrespect NoBody](#);

- [UK Safer Internet Centre](#);
- [Internetmatters.org](#);
- [PSHE Association](#);
- [Educate Against Hate](#);
- [The use of social media for online radicalisation \(GOV.UK\)](#).

Communications Act 2003

[Click here to view the Communications Act 2003.](#)

Sending by means of the internet a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character; or sending a false message by means of or persistently making use of the Internet for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety is guilty of an offence liable, on conviction, to imprisonment. This wording is important because an offence is complete as soon as the message has been sent: there is no need to prove any intent or purpose.

Protection of Children Act 1978

[Click here to view the Protection of Children Act 1978.](#)

It is an offence to take, permit to be taken, make, possess, show, distribute or advertise indecent images of children in the United Kingdom. A child for these purposes is anyone under the age of 18. Viewing an indecent image of a child on your computer means that you have made a digital image. An image of a child also covers pseudo-photographs (digitally collated or otherwise). A person convicted of such an offence may face up to 10 years in prison.

Sexual Offences Act 2003

[Click here to view the Sexual Offences Act 2003.](#)

The offence of grooming is committed if you are over 18 and have communicated with a child under 16 on one occasion (including by phone or using the Internet) it is an offence to meet them or travel to meet them anywhere in the world with the intention of committing a sexual offence. Causing a child under 16 to watch a sexual act is illegal, including looking at images such as videos, photos or webcams, for your own gratification. It is also an offence for a person in a position of trust to engage in sexual activity with any person under 18, with whom they are in a position of trust. (Typically, teachers, social workers, health professionals, connexions staff fall in this category of trust). Any sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 13 commits the offence of rape.

Serious Crime Act 2015

[Click here to view the Serious Crime Act 2015.](#)

The Act introduced a new offence of sexual communication with a child. This would criminalise an adult who communicates with a child for the purpose of obtaining sexual gratification, where the communication is sexual or if it is intended to elicit from the child a communication which is sexual and the adult reasonably believes the child to be under 16.