E-Safety: Children exposed to abuse through digital media

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Definition

Online or ‘E’-Safety are generic terms that refer to raising awareness about how children, young people and adults can protect themselves when using digital technology and in the online environment.

‘Online abuse’ relates to the following areas of abuse to children:

- Abusive images of children, a child or young person being groomed for the purpose of sexual abuse or exposure to pornographic images via the internet.
- The use of the internet, and in particular social media sites, to engage children in extremist ideologies.
- Offensive material and websites including those promoting negative lifestyle choices, for example self-harm/suicide and pro-anorexia, among others.
- The use of the internet to threaten, harass, bully and humiliate children and young people (e.g. cyber bullying and relationship abuse).

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 through the internet, being available using text, photos and video. The internet can be accessed on mobile phones, laptops, computers, tablets, webcams, cameras 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 or promote extreme behaviours and justify or attempt to justify political, religious, sexist or racist violence.
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 or adult using the internet and/or mobile devices. 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 (see Domestic Abuse procedure).

Youth produced sexual imagery (sexting) describes the use of technology to generate images or videos that are of a sexual nature and are indecent. The content can vary, from text messages to images of partial nudity to sexual images or video. These images are then shared between young people and/or adults and with people they may not even know. Young people are not always aware that their actions are illegal and the increasing use of smart phones has made the practice much more common place.

The procedures relating to Organised and Complex Abuse and Allegations Against Staff or Volunteers should be borne in mind depending on the circumstances of the concerns.

**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.

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. Whilst young people should be discouraged from meeting somebody face to face whom they have only previously met online, we recognise that this does happen and advise that they always take a parent/carer or trusted adult with them should they do so.

Children and young people should be discouraged from taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves and sharing them on the internet or by text. It is essential that young people understand the legal implications and the risks they are taking. It is illegal to create, possess and distribute an indecent image of a child (under 18). Children also need to made aware of the long-term impact of sharing images such as the detrimental impact on future employment prospects or relationships. The initial risk posed by sexting (youth produced sexual imagery) may come from peers, friends and others in their social network who may share the images. Once an image has been sent, it is then out of your control and could be shared with others or posted elsewhere 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.

In some cases adults may also groom a young persons into sending such images which can then be used to blackmail and ensnare them (sextortion) – see Child Sexual Exploitation procedure.
Children and young people should be advised to look at ‘safety centres’ on the sites and apps that they use to ensure that their privacy settings are as secure as possible, in order to avoid strangers making contact.

It is key to remember that the internet can also be a support mechanism for children and young people, where they can contact friends/family and obtain advice. Where possible and appropriate, working with the child to use the internet safely after an incident will more beneficial than removing their access and/or devices.

**Risks**

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 in various states of undress, sexual poses and/or being sexually abused.

Consideration should be given to whether 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.

Consideration 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 or 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.

Similarly, children may be drawn to adopt a radical ideology through a failure to appreciate the bias in extremist material; in addition by repeated viewing of extreme content they may come to consider it as normal.

**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.

The initial indicators of child abuse are likely to be changes in behaviour and mood of the child victim including a change in their use of the internet-enabled devices (e.g. increase or decrease). 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 seek advice and help.

**Protection and action to be taken**

If a child is at immediate risk of harm contact the police.

Where there is suspected or actual evidence of anyone accessing or creating indecent images of children, concerns about a child being groomed, exposed to pornographic material or contacted by someone inappropriately, via the internet or other ICT tools such as a mobile phone this must be referred to the police and/or children’s social care in line with the Referrals procedure.

The [Serious Crime Act (2015)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/12) 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.

Due to the nature of this type of abuse and the possibility of the destruction of evidence, the referrer should first discuss their concerns with the police and/or children’s social care before raising the matter with the family. This will enable a joint decision to be made about informing the family, ensuring that the child’s welfare is safeguarded and preserving potential evidence.

Where there are concerns relating to cyberbullying, the setting’s anti-bullying policy should be followed. Headteachers have powers to discipline pupils for poor behaviour outside of the school premises which includes online behaviour. If there is a criminal element to an incident (such as assault or harassment) the decision may be made to contact police.

Where a sexting (youth produced sexual imagery) incident has taken place, settings should follow the national guidance ‘[Sexting in schools and colleges: Responding to incidents and safeguarding young people](https://gov.uk/government/publications/extreme-materials-in-schools)' (for a quick guide see [Advice for schools: Responding to & Managing Sexting Incidents](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexting-in-schools-and-colleges)).

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. If you are concerned about a person or an institution either contact your agency’s safeguarding lead or the police.

Suspected online terrorist material can be reported through [Report online terrorist material](https://www.gov.uk/report-online-terrorist-material). Reports can be made anonymously by members of the public, although practitioners should not do so as they must follow
the procedures for professionals. Content of concerns can also be reported directly to social media platforms (see Safety features on social networks - UK - Safer Internet Centre).

**Further information**

Behaviour that is illegal if committed offline is also illegal if committed online. If cases involve the criminal use of communication systems (i.e. through the use of mobile phones or the internet) the police will deal with them accordingly. Various criminal and civil laws can apply to any misuse of the internet that is seen as harassment, threatening behaviour or cyber-bullying (Protection from Harassment Act 1997, Malicious Communications Act 1988, Section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984, Communications Act 2003, Public Order Act 1986).

The Protection of Children Act 1978 makes it an offence to take, permit to be taken, make, possess, show, distribute or advertise indecent images of children in the UK.

Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the offence of grooming is committed if you are over 18 and have communicated with a child under 16 at least twice (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.

For further information see:

- thinkUknow
- Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre
- UK Safer Internet
- To report/remove content online, contact the site directly or via the Internet Watch Foundation
- If an under-18-year-old has an explicit or nude image of themselves shared online, Childline and IWF have an app, Yoti, that can be used to help get it confidentially removed.
- Child Safety Online: A practical guide for parents and carers whose children are using social media