

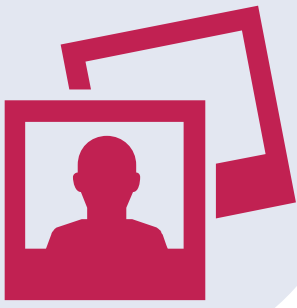
# Online Sexual Harm Reduction Guide



This guide has been developed to address the challenges **professionals** face when working with issues of online harm and young people.

It contains information about what online harm is, the specific issues facing young people, and ways professionals can effectively engage with young people and their families.





## What is online harm?

Simply put, it is any behaviour online that causes harm; this could be physical, emotional or sexual.

Online sexual harm includes:

- Sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Grooming – Befriending a child and building trust so they can sexually harm them.
- Sexting – Sending or receiving messages that are about sex.
- Sending or receiving sexual photos.
- Sextortion – Forcing somebody to do something by threatening to publish sexual material about them.
- Children being encouraged to access adult porn sites.

A common theme of online harm involves the young person being asked or coerced into sexually inappropriate actions. Online harm is just as damaging as contact offences. Where images are produced young people may have long-term worries about where they are and who is seeing them.





## Why young people don't tell

Whether sexual abuse occurs offline or online, it is very difficult for children to disclose.

This is because an integral part of a sex offender's behaviour is the grooming of the child to prevent them from talking.

There are many reasons why young people may never tell including: shame, fear, being told to keep it secret or believing that they are to blame. They might not recognise that they are being groomed or may see the offender as a friend.

There are additional challenges when the harm is online. It is easier for sex offenders to operate secretly by lying about their age or identity. They have access to a much wider group of young people,

don't have to wait as long for somebody to respond and have easier and more intense private access to a child through the lack of protective adults' presence.

Offenders often request compromising images to prevent disclosure. It is unlikely that a child will tell you they have been sexually abused online. It is more likely the abuse will be discovered by someone else.

The child may even deny it when asked. Your response to the information, both in what you say and how you act, can affect the young person's long-term recovery.

## Best practice

The way we respond to young people who have been harmed online is an important part of enabling them to recover.

Professionals working with young people will know the value of relationship-based work. There are additional challenges when working with those who may not know that they are being harmed, may be too embarrassed to tell, don't know who to talk to or may have complex circumstances with little support.

We must think about creative ways to engage with young people particularly when the harm is discovered by us rather than disclosed by the young person.

Young people don't think like we do. We know that the adolescent brain is not fully

developed until the mid-twenties and the teenage years see the second biggest growth spurt in brain development.

While adults "think" when making decisions, teenagers are much more emotional when processing information.

This means teenagers are more likely to take risks without thinking of the long-term impact.

Thus we may say they "live for the moment". This makes them more vulnerable to exploitation as they may engage with somebody without wondering why a person they don't know is talking to them. It is well documented that even adults have been duped by internet scams, take risks and make mistakes when engaging with people online so why should young people be any different?



**As professionals it is important that we accept that all young people take risks. It is a natural phase in their development and we cannot prevent it. Our job is to minimise any harm flowing from that risk.**





One size does not fit all. There is a tendency to try and find one solution to fit all people. Successful intervention needs to be person-centred. A young person living with caring parents who have talked about internet safety and supported their child to be safe online needs a very different approach from a child looked after by a local authority as a result of neglectful parenting. There is an assumption that the first young person will be safe but we know that, as with offline sexual abuse, children from all walks of life may be subjected to harm online.

Before deciding what intervention or action to take it is important to see things from the young person's perspective, involve them in decision-making and create a plan that is unique to them.

**What we need is an approach that meets the young person where "they're at" rather than placing a standard set of interventions that may not be needs-led.**

Language is important. The words and phrases we use when talking about online sexual harm can affect the messages we want to give when we are talking to or about young people. Language implying that the young person is to blame could be self-fulfilling. Talking about a young person putting themselves at risk suggests that they are responsible, instead be more explicit about the issue such as "the young person may be being groomed" or "it is unclear why the young person is meeting with somebody online".



**Language that blames the victim may reinforce messages around shame and guilt. Consider the language you want to use before using it. Does any part focus on the young person's responsibility for their actions? If so, change it.**

## What we need to do...

Professionals need to consider how they respond and act on information about online harm.

### Initial Steps

- Prepare and make sure you know as much as possible about the family.
- Listen to what the young person and their family have to say.
- Take your time and build a relationship with the family.
- Be clear with the family about what your concerns are.
- Tell the child that it is not their fault and they are not to blame.

### Working Together

- Work collaboratively with the family and other professionals.
- Share information to get a whole picture.
- Include the parents as safeguarding partners, with support they are often best placed to help their child.
- Help parents to understand the importance of language and attitudes.
- Ask the child what they want to happen.
- Work with the family to help them understand online sexual harm and the impact it may have on the child and wider family.

### Looking forward

- Identify key people who the family can work with.
- Involve the child and their family in identifying these people.
- Explore the harm reduction strategies we have set out in this guide.
- Ensure the child and their family have the right ongoing support to enable recovery.
- Review the support being offered to identify any new, unmet need.

## Things we need to think about

### Do

- ✓ Take the young person seriously.
- ✓ Be open to what you are being told.
- ✓ Be non-judgemental in your approach.
- ✓ Consider reasons for changes in behaviour.
- ✓ Accept that young people will take risks online.
- ✓ Think about how we can keep young people safe online.

### Don't

- ✗ Assume the young person will tell you.
- ✗ Feel threatened by technology.
- ✗ Expect young people to keep themselves safe.
- ✗ Blame the young person or their family.
- ✗ Expect the young person to listen to you.
- ✗ Assume you are the best person to support the young person or their family.

## Helping young people to know that they're not to blame

Children are likely to feel that what has happened is their fault. They need to be reassured that it isn't. The process of grooming and manipulation should be explained to them in a way that is appropriate for their age and level of understanding so that they understand that it is the perpetrator's fault, not theirs.

## If we give the right messages children can and do recover

What has happened does not have to define them forever and they can go on to live safe, happy and fulfilling lives. BUT it is important that they receive the right support to allow this to happen. Remember that recovery is not always linear and support needs to remain in place during these times. There may also be relapses and support should be quickly available to continue the recovery process.



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