



Sexual Abuse Online

Helping my autistic child

In this booklet you will find information about what online harm is and ways you can effectively help and support your children.



The
Marie Collins
Foundation

ann craft trust
acting against abuse

We know parents and carers worry about online sexual harm and what to do if it happened to their child. When you are caring for an autistic child, it can feel like there are lots of extra things to think about. How we respond to an autistic child who might have been sexually harmed online can impact on their recovery so it's important to send the right messages from the start.



What is online harm?

It is any behaviour online that causes harm

**physical,
emotional,
or sexual.**

Remember

Harm is still harm, even if doesn't feel like it or we don't recognise it.

It includes:

Sexual abuse and exploitation

Grooming

Someone making friends with a child and building trust so they can sexually harm them

Sexting

Sending or receiving messages that are about sex

Sexual photos

Sending or receiving sexual photos

Sextortion

Forcing somebody to do something by threatening to publish sexual images or information about them

Porn sites

Children being encouraged to access adult porn sites

Should I keep my child off the internet to protect them?

No. These days young people don't separate online and offline, it's just 'life' to them! So, just like we let them explore "the real world" while keeping them safe, it's just as important to do this online too.

For autistic children there are many benefits to being online:

- *It can be freeing* as they don't have to tell anybody that they have autism and can just be themselves
- *It can spare eye contact* for those who find it uncomfortable, allowing more space for them to process the interaction
- *It helps them to feel connected* to others and to the wider world
- *It can be fun* and allows them to pursue their interests.

How might autism affect my child's safety online?

You might be worried that your child is 'automatically' more vulnerable online because of how they communicate and interact with the world, or because they may be more isolated than others their age.

Depending on your child's needs they may have additional struggles with using the internet and need more support. Your child may be technically very good with computers and knowing how technology works (and how to get around the parental controls!) but may have difficulties in understanding how others behave online and in communicating with them. This applies to all children, but may be harder for autistic children. It's our job as parents (with the help

of professionals, if needed) to work out what, and how much, support our child needs.

Every child is different and will need different support to be safe online and this changes over time.



How can I help my child to be online safely?

As your child grows older, they might want to make new friends, explore relationships, sex and their sexual identity. This might lead them into unfamiliar situations, and you may be worried about them being unable to recognise when they feel unsafe. This is why it's crucial for you to keep talking to them, to help them identify those feelings and understand that they can come to you if they feel unsafe.



How do I talk to my child about this?

To start the conversation, you could ask:

- What are their interests and what websites, apps or games they use
- About their friends online and whether people they don't know try to talk to them.

Once you feel more confident, you can ask direct questions about specific concerns you might have. If you don't understand how something works online, ask your child to explain it or show you how to do it.

Talk to your child regularly about online issues. That way you will both start to feel more comfortable and they are more likely to tell you if something online doesn't feel right.

Top Talking Tips

Be clear and honest about what is ok and not ok online. Tell them they can talk to you about anything.

When talking about online safety it's important to be careful about the language you use.

Avoid saying things that imply that your child is to blame for being harmed online, such as "I told you not to do that" or "you shouldn't have been speaking to that person". If a child thinks that it is their fault and that they will get into trouble, then they won't tell us about it.



Why don't children tell us?

Children often don't tell us if they have been sexually harmed online. It's very common for them to be frightened, embarrassed or ashamed of what has happened to them.

Abusers often trick children and their methods can be even more effective for some autistic children. If a child thinks they have a friendship or relationship with a person, they might not recognise that they are being abused, and more likely to believe what the abuser tells them and may try to protect them.

If the abuser makes a child think that they "made a choice" or "started it" they might feel like it is their fault, and the guilt will stop them from telling you.

Looking out for signs of online abuse

You may find out if your child is unsafe online by finding images or conversations on devices, and sometimes the child's behaviour tells you something isn't right.

Here are some signs that might tell you something is wrong:

- Being secretive/defensive about what they're doing online
- Changes in the amount of time they spend online or on their interests
- Having new things, clothes, mobile phone that they can't or don't want to explain
- Sexual behaviour that isn't appropriate for their age and/or development
- Being upset, withdrawn or showing new/increased displays of anger

- They might not know how to tell you something isn't right, instead they may say something like "I have a funny feeling in my tummy" or may show a lot of anxiety towards something that wouldn't usually bother them.

These are only some of the possible signs but there may be other indicators that something is not right. You know your child best, so if something does not seem right then it's worth thinking about whether online harm is the cause.



How should I respond if something does happen (or has happened)?

First, don't panic! It can be scary if your child tells you something, or you find something out that makes you think they have been harmed online. You will probably want to react straight away and try to make it better.

Stop, take a breath and take some time to think.

Do:

- Listen and take your child seriously. Reassure them that they are not in any trouble and have done the right thing by telling you
- Include your child in discussions with others. It's important that they feel they are at the centre of any decisions made
- Talk to your child's school and find out what they cover in class. Try to keep messages at home and school consistent. Talk to the school if you have worries.

Remember

- **Young people take risks online,** this is part of teenage development
- **You are not alone** and there is support for you if you need it
- **It is not your fault or your child's fault.** The only person to blame is the abuser. They are clever and know how to exploit people and manipulate them into doing things.

Don't:

- Assume your child will be safe because they have received online safety lessons at school
- Blame your child if something has happened. They may already be worried about what you will say, and your response will be important in how your child makes sense of what has happened to them.

1

Think about what time would be best, taking into account their routine

5

Be clear and factual, this will help calm your child

4

You may feel angry and upset and want separate support for yourself. Try not to show these emotions to your child as they need to see a calm and gentle approach

2

Choose a place where your child feels most comfortable and free from any distractions or interruptions

When you talk to your child about what they have told you or what you have found out these 5 points can help...

3

Sometimes young people don't want to talk to their parents/carers and might feel more comfortable speaking to someone else, think about who they usually go to

Getting help from others

You don't have to deal with this alone, you can ask for support. You could speak to somebody at your child's school or a support worker who knows your family. You could also contact one of the organisations at the back of this leaflet.

Getting advice and support at an early stage can help prevent any further harm for your child.

If there are concerns that your child might have been harmed online it is likely that professionals, such as social services and the police, will need to be involved. This is to ensure that your child is safe, to investigate what may have happened and, if someone has harmed your child, to bring them to justice. You or your child will not be judged on what you have or haven't done, it's about working together to protect your child from any further harm. Professionals will need to know about your child's individual needs and your view about what you need to keep your child safe. This also helps them to know how best to speak to your child about what has happened, if they need to. You will be the best person to help professionals understand what works for your child.

Where can I go to get more help?

If your child tells you they have been sexually abused online you should contact the police immediately.

If you are worried about online sexual abuse or the way somebody is communicating online, you can contact the following organisations:

NCA CEOP To report online sexual abuse - www.ceop.police.uk

NSPCC | 0800 800 5000 | www.nspcc.org.uk

More general advice and support is available from the following organisations:

National Autistic Society | www.autism.org.uk

ChildNet | www.childnet.com

Internet Matters | www.internetmatters.org

NCA CEOP | www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents

NWG | www.nwgnetwork.org

Lucy Faithfull Foundation | www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk



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