



TRAINING
EXPRESS



SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE ONLINE ARENA

By Training Express

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in the Online Arena

Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Table of contents | 3 |
| List of figures and tables | 4 |
| List of acronyms | 4 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| Section 1: Children’s Online presence | 2 |
| Section 2: Online vulnerability & risks | 3 |
| Section 3: Sexual abuse & exploitation of children online | 4 |
| Sexual exploitation | 4 |
| Sexual abuse | 5 |
| Sexual abuse and exploitation of children online | 5 |
| Demographics of sexually abused and exploited children | 7 |
| Section 4: Recognising sexual abuse and the abuser | 9 |
| Online sexual abusers and exploiters of children | 9 |
| Signs of child sexual abuse and exploitation | 10 |
| Section 5: Safe online environment for children..... | 11 |
| Conclusion..... | 11 |
| References | 12 |

List of figures and tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: Number of children who have their own devices | 3 |
| Figure 2: Age breakdown of child sexual abuse images | 8 |
| Figure 3: Gender breakdown of child sexual abuse images | 9 |
| Figure 4: Gender breakdown of unidentified victims from ICSE database | 9 |
| Figure 5: Ethnicity of unidentified victims in ICSE database | 9 |
| Figure 6: Ethnicity of visible offenders | 10 |
| Table 1: Online risks | 3 |

List of acronyms

ECPAT - End Child Prostitution and Trafficking

EU - European Union

ICSE - International Child Sexual Exploitation Database

INTERPOL - International police

IWF - Internet Watch Foundation

Ofcom - Office of communications

UK - United Kingdom

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

URL - Unique Resource Locator

WHO - World Health Organization

Introduction

The invention of the internet has undoubtedly made information more accessible. In this age of the internet, everything is one click away from us. But every coin has two sides. While the internet has many benefits, it also comes with some dangers. Children are the most vulnerable when it comes to online threats. Their innocence and lack of knowledge about human cruelty make them a target of online sexual abuse and exploitation. While online is not meant for sexual abuse and exploitation of children, it does facilitate these crimes.

Children and young people should have internet access for digital inclusion and keeping up with the rest of the world. So we cannot deny them that opportunity. What we can do is to provide them with a safe online environment to grow and excel. But it is easier said than done.

However, proper measures can reduce risks to some extent. For example, parents can communicate openly with their children and educate them about online dangers. Effective communication and knowledge about online experiences are crucial for child safety online. Cyber activities of children also affect their day to day behaviour offline. With the closing gap of children's online and offline life, the stakes are higher.

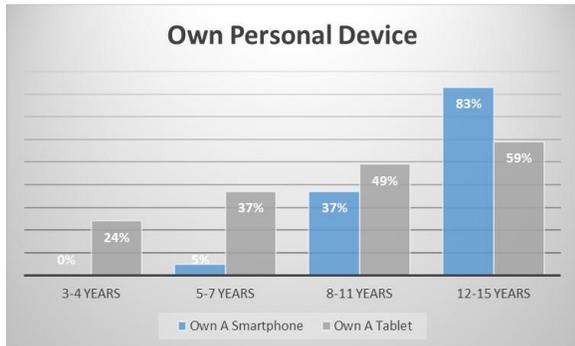
Section 1: Children's Online presence

Children are growing up in a world where online interaction is more common than face to face conversations. Almost half of the ten-year-olds in the UK have their own smartphone ([Ofcom, 2019](#)). In 2010, [Livingstone and Haddon survey](#) revealed that only 21% of 9 to 16 year olds had mobile access in the EU. The percentage increase is an indicator of how easily young people adapt to new technologies.

We cannot deny that the internet plays a vital role in children's learning and social development. Nonetheless, they also expose children to new and changing forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. Sometimes due to their expertise and ease with electronics, their parents don't think it might harm them. Even though they instinctively know to keep them safe from dangers.

Children's online activities are not as limited as they were ten years ago. They have a diverse range of online activities to choose from. With many of them having their own device, it is even easier to explore online options. The graph below shows how many children (aged 3-15 years old) in the UK have their own electronic devices.

Figure 1: Number of children who have their own devices



Source: [Office of Communications, 2019](#)

Children are mainly involved in the following online activities -

- Social media like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and more.
- Video streaming sites, such as - YouTube, Netflix, Disney+ etc.
- Online games like Fortnite, Minecraft and so on.

But children’s activities are not limited to these only. Every child has their own interests and likes. While some enjoy socialising with people on social media platforms, some prefer playing video games on their PS4.

Section 2: Online vulnerability & risks

With the development of information and communication technologies, children’s learning patterns and mediums are also changing. They are no longer limited to their parents, peers or teachers influence. They are exposed to a vast

sea of information and ideas through online platforms. These have a significant impact on the children’s values, beliefs and actions. While such exposure can bring positive changes, they also bring negative experiences.

Increased online presence has provided new venues for sexual abuse and child exploitation. They have more chances of facing the three C’s of online risk: content, contact and conduct. Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Haddon of [EU Kids Online](#) have provided a helpful classification of the danger and behaviours from the children’s perspective, which is given below:

Table 1: Online risks

| | Risks | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| | COMMERCIAL | AGGRESSIVE | SEXUAL |
| CONTENT (Child as recipient) | Adverts, Spam, Sponsorship Personal information | Violent or hateful content | Pornographic or unwelcome sexual content |
| CONTACT (Child as participant) | Tracking Harvesting Personal information | Being bullied, harassed or stalked | Meeting strangers Being groomed |
| CONDUCT (Child as actor) | Illegal downloading Hacking Gambling Financial scams Terrorism | Bullying or harassing another person | Creating and uploading inappropriate material |

Content – This refers to children being subjected to harmful and unsolicited content online. The child has no active role in this context. They are the mere recipients of various unwanted content because they happen to be online. This type of content is not targeted; instead, the child accidentally comes across it. According to [Guardchild](#), 70% of children accidentally encounter online pornography while doing homework research.

Contact – In this regard, the child is targeted as a participant. It may be in a one-on-one activity

initiated by another child or an adult. Few instances of risks caused by contact are bullying, stalking or tracking and so on. In some severe cases, the following may happen -

- Encourage children to commit self-harm.
- Groom kids online for sexual abuse.
- Force children to watch pornographic images and videos.
- Sell them online for both online and offline sexual abuse.
- Target children to engage in cybersex.
- Force children to contact the abuser on online platforms or through mobile phones.

Conduct – Here, the child is an actor that initiates risky or unsafe behaviour. It usually happens in the following instances -

- Children create or upload inappropriate content.
- When they are bullied or harassed by another person
- Sharing personal information online.
- Downloading sexually abusive images of others.
- Sharing images of themselves or others online
- Making friends online without knowing them in real life

In these contexts, the child is the initiator of risk-taking or harmful behaviours. This type of

behaviour puts themselves at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation online.

However, the rise of online activities is not the main reason behind sexual abuse and exploitation. But it does allow perpetrators and abusers easier access to children.

Section 3: Sexual abuse & exploitation of children online

Before discussing sexual abuse and exploitation, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the age of consent. Wikipedia defines the [age of consent](#), as the age at which a person is considered legally competent to consent to sexual acts. The age of consent varies from country to country and region to region. For example, it is 16 for everyone in the UK, but in some countries, it is as low as 12. Suppose someone is under the age of consent. In that case, any sort of sexual activity is illegal as they are considered children and unable to consent.

Sexual exploitation

[Save the Children](#) defines sexual exploitation as- “The abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes - including profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the exploitation of another as well as personal sexual gratification.”

In brief, child sexual exploitation is actual or attempted abuse of children from a position of power, or trust, for sexual purposes. Power may come from the difference in age, gender, strength, intellect, money, or other resources. It often results in unfair, cruel and hurtful treatment of children. Also, these acts are harmful to the child's physical and mental health. It hampers their education, moral, social and emotional development.

Sexual abuse

[UNICEF](#) defines sexual abuse as actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.

[WHO](#) characterises sexual abuse as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she -

- can not fully comprehend;
- is not able to give informed consent to;
- for which the child is not ready;
- and anything else that violates the rules or social taboos of society.

Child sexual abuse is established by activity between a child and an adult or another child who is in a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power by age or development. The said activity is intended to satisfy the sexual needs of the other person.

Sexual abuse and exploitation of children online

Online sexual abuse and exploitation is a relatively new crime. It is a unique form of child abuse due to its virtual, distanced, and anonymous nature. Whereby perpetrators use information and communication technologies to target their victims. They coerce children and young people into inappropriate and illegal sex acts through these channels and platforms. Their choice methods are live stream, web cameras, gaming platforms, social media platforms and others.

Online sexual abuse differs from other types of sexual abuse. It can be executed secretly on a large scale. Thus, it allows the offender to evade capture. Moreover, technology offers them more opportunities to find young blood to prey upon.

Predators make contact with target children in various settings. Most common places are chat rooms where almost 76% of first encounters occur ([Online child abuse, 2020](#)). With the rise of social media and online gaming, the predator's arena has also broadened. They stalk children on a variety of social media platforms. For example, they can easily follow children on Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and others. They try to gather as much personal information as possible from what children share, before making any moves. They emotionally

manipulate, blackmail, bully children into fulfilling their wicked desires.

Aside from social media and gaming platforms, the dark web is where the most heinous child sexual abuse occurs. Dark Web is known as the den of mysterious and illicit activities for its anonymity. But according to a study finding, 80% of the dark web traffic is driven by sexual child abuse contents ([Greenberg, 2017](#)).

Different forms of sexual abuse and extortion online

Online sexual abuse and exploitation are slightly different from offline in the forms it can take, methods and other mechanisms. The following are some forms of online sexual abuse and exploitation. Keep in mind, forms of abuse and exploitation are not limited to these only.

1. Online child sexual abuse material

This refers to any images or videos containing child sexual abuse and exploitation. This includes -

- accessing
- possessing
- producing
- distributing

any kind of pictures and videos featuring any children. It is commonly known as child pornography. It is shocking how easy it is to find them, and also the amount of such content

exists online. [Internet Watch Foundation \(IWF\)](#) checks a website every 4 minutes, and every 7 minutes, the webpage shows a child being sexually abused. IWF confirmed 78,589 URLs containing child sexual abuse imagery in 2017 alone. Whereby these URLs had links to the imagery, or they were actively advertising it.

2. Grooming children for sexual purposes

Grooming is the process of befriending children and young people online for sexual purposes. This is intended to facilitate online sexual contact and physically meet them to commit sexual abuse. Increased social media usage, messaging apps and live-streaming apps in recent years have seen a dramatic increase in reports of this crime. Research suggests that arrests for Internet sex crimes against children often have a connection with social networking sites ([Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 185](#)).

A report suggests that adolescents are most at risk of grooming, especially adolescent girls. Because at that stage, young people are active users of the internet to meet people and make friends. This is part of the process of developing their sense of self and their

sexual and emotional identities ([UNICEF, 2012](#)).

[The National Crime Agency](#) of the UK government says that criminals who groom children online may travel to other countries where the law is comparatively more lax to carry out their abuse. Online abuse is often carried out by lone offenders who access children online. They manage to evade detection using the dark web known as the hotbed of criminal activity.

3. Sextortion

Sextortion refers to an online crime where the offender threatens children to acquire sexual content from them. While tracking sextortion, [CyberTipline](#) found that 78% of the reports involved female children and 15% involved male children. They were aged between 8 and 17 years. The report also mentions that 67% of offenders threatened to post previously acquired sexual content online. And 29% specifically threatened to post it in a place for family and friends could see them if the child did not comply ([National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2016](#)).

4. Live-streaming sexual abuse of children

Live-streaming of sexual abuse of children occurs using online video applications in real-time. In live-stream participants can view, and sometimes interact with children live. Usually, children are forced to appear in front of a webcam -

- to engage in sexual behaviour
- to be subjected to sexual abuse

These acts are live-streamed on the internet for paying customers. [ECPAT](#) says that the offender may view or request a particular type of abuse to be perpetrated in real-time. Offenders usually gain access through intermediaries or facilitators. Surprisingly, facilitators are sometimes from the child's family or a community member. The parties agree on a specific time, date and price beforehand. They use various platforms, like Skype or other webcam supported sites. The dark web plays a significant role in this kind of abuse.

Demographics of sexually abused and exploited children

Any child can be a victim of sexual abuse and exploitation regardless of their gender, religion, ethnicity. However, information-backed research has shed light on a few demographics like age,

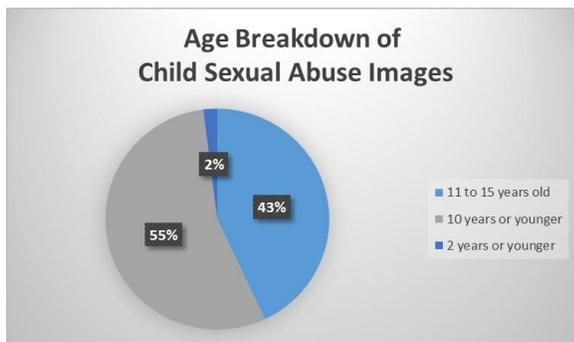
gender and race of sexually abused and exploited children.

Age

Based on the [Internet Watch Foundation's](#)

findings, the majority of the child sexual abuse images(55%) of children aged 10 years or younger. Also, 43% of them are of children aged between 11 and 15 years.

Figure 2: Age breakdown of child sexual abuse images



Source: [Internet Watch Foundation](#)

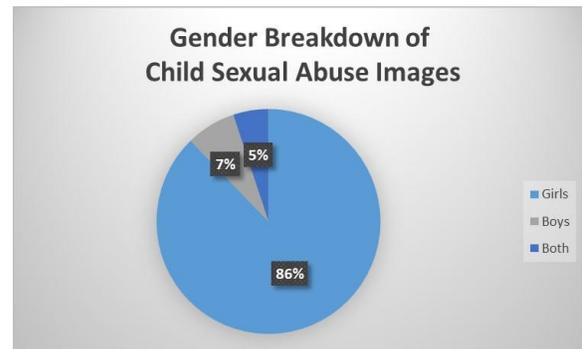
According to another study, more than 60% of the victims were pubescent, while 4.3% were toddlers. The younger the victim, the more acute the abuse is ([ECPAT; INTERPOL, 2018](#)).

Gender

Another noticeable factor is that most of the child victims are girls. Findings from IWF show a massive gap in percentage between girls and boys regarding child sexual abuse

images. The chart below shows the gender breakdown of child sexual abuse images found online.

Figure 3: Gender breakdown of child sexual abuse images



Source: [Internet Watch Foundation](#)

INTERPOL and ECPAT International published a report on Unidentified Victims in Child Sexual Exploitation Material. The following statistics were found from the ICSE database. It also shows most victims as girls while the severity of abuse in boys was more intense.

Figure 4: Gender breakdown of unidentified victims from ICSE database

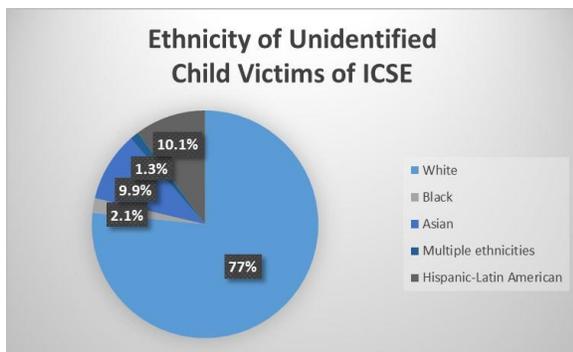


Source: [ECPAT International](#)

Ethnicity

The report from ECPAT also shed some light on the ethnic background of the unidentified victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The following pie chart shows the ethnicity of victims based on visual analysis

Figure 5: Ethnicity of unidentified victims in the ICSE database



Source: [ECPAT International](#)

Section 4: Recognising sexual abuse and the abuser

Online sexual abusers and exploiters of children

The perpetrator of online abuse and exploitation can be anyone. Anyone from a stranger to a close family friend as it is impossible to know one's true intentions. Some children and young people are sexually abused and exploited by criminal gangs, while most are lone offenders.

Sexual abuse is not just perpetrated by males. Women also commit acts of sexual abuse and exploitation, as do other children. 97.2% of visible offenders were male while female offenders were 7.5% in ICSE database([ECPAT; INTERPOL, 2018](#)).

Figure 6: Ethnicity of visible offenders



Source: [ECPAT International](#)

Cyberspace provides a variety of facilities in which predators can do the following and much more -

- Find potential victims and manipulate them for sexual purposes.
- Groom their potential victims
- Produce child sexual abuse materials, upload and circulate them.
- Use online networks to communicate with fellow offenders.
- Show real-time abuse and share images to gain credibility among other offenders.
- Hide their identity to evade detection

Criminals can be hard to identify because they often use nicknames, rather than their real name.

Another reason is that they cover their online activity trails strategically. Some other tactics used by the offenders include -

- Coercing the child into providing sexual content by promising reciprocity.
- Establishing a bond by developing a friendly or romantic relationship
- Secretly recording explicit videos of the child during video chats.
- Threatening to harm or sexually assault the child or the child's close one's
- Using multiple accounts or profiles to contact a child, blackmail them for sexual content
- Pretending to be of a specific gender or age to get the child to trust them or like them
- Accessing the child's online account without authorisation and storing pictures or videos of the child
- Threatening to produce sexual content of the child using editing software. For example, merging the child's face with another person's body.
- Threatening to do self-harm if the child does not provide sexual content
- Creating a fake profile of the child and threatening to post sexual content
- Offering money, drugs or gifts to the child in exchange for sexually explicit photos or videos
- Pretending to work for a modelling agency to obtain sexual content of the child

It is important to know how criminal minds work and what tactics they use to abuse and exploit children.

Signs of child sexual abuse and exploitation

It is pivotal to be aware of the symptoms of child abuse to ensure children protection. The signs of child sexual abuse and exploitation may be hard to recognise, especially if the child is being threatened. Also, the dynamics of child sexual abuse differs from adult sexual abuse. One of the reasons is because they are rarely aware of what to do in such situations. The following signs may help recognise if a child has been subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation -

- Unexplained gifts or possessions that are not accounted for
- Experiencing health problems indicating a sexually transmitted disease. For example, childhood syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia.
- Severe mood swings and changes in temperament
- Exhibiting inappropriate sexualised behaviour, such as dressing inappropriately, taking and sharing sexualised pictures.
- Extreme body image concerns
- Having low self-esteem, depression, anxiety

- Showing symptoms associated with PTSD such as re-experiencing, avoidance, numbing
- Cognitive impairment and loss of social competence

Keep in mind there could be other signs not mentioned above, and one sign might not be enough to say that someone has been sexually abused or exploited. For example, anxiety can be caused by various reasons unrelated to abuse.

Section 5: Safe online environment for children

Children's desire to explore the online world and not being matured enough to manage or understand online risks is a dangerous combination. Parents can play an essential part in keeping their children safe from online predators. Parents can help their child manage these risks by asking their child the following questions -

- Where they are going and what they see?
- What they do online?
- Who are they talking to?

Asking these questions will help understand content risk, conduct risk and contact risk that a child might be exposed to. Parental controls and open communication can also help a lot in preventing such abuse and exploitation.

Banning internet or technology access is not the solution. It only makes children less likely to

report a problem. Education about e-safety is essential for safeguarding children.

Effective child-centred law enforcement and cooperation across law enforcement agencies are necessary to stop child sexual abuse and exploitation online. Collaboration with the private sector is also pivotal because most Information and Communication Technology are not very regulated and are privately owned. It is better to take precautions and preventive measures than letting a child be a victim. That is why ensuring a secure online environment is essential for safeguarding children.

Conclusion

The evolution of information and communications technology will go on along with its impact on children's life. While web access is increasing globally, so is online risks. While children need protection, it is crucial to keep in mind that the internet also provides them with a new and exciting route for interaction and exploration.

There is no fixed blueprint for prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation of children online. Furthermore, most countries have laws that criminalise child sexual abuse but the main issue with online sexual abuse and exploitation is the detection and poor enforcement. It is necessary to address underlying problems to safeguard children.

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