

Online abuse: learning from case reviews

Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice around online abuse

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Introduction

Published case reviews highlight that the internet presents extra challenges for those working to protect children from abuse. Perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation can form online communities and share child sexual abuse images online. They may also contact and groom children via social networking sites, without the knowledge of their parents or professionals. Young people may be exposed to harmful online content and be tricked or coerced into sharing sexual images of themselves, which are then shared more widely without their consent.

The learning from these reviews highlights that professionals need to be able to recognise online abuse and understand the complex ways in which it can take place.

People who work with children and young people should be able to raise awareness about online safety and encourage them to talk about what they do online and who they communicate with.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2008, where online abuse was a key factor. It pulls together and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

In these case reviews, children died or were seriously injured in the following ways:

- suicide following cyberbullying
- death or serious harm following accessing harmful content online
- online grooming leading to sexual abuse and exploitation
- vulnerable parents targeted by abusive adults via dating websites and social networking sites
- children sexually abused in order to share images of child sexual abuse online
- contact child sexual abuse by perpetrators who had previously been known to police for sharing child sexual abuse images online.

Risk factors for online abuse in case reviews

People can control the way they present themselves online

Using virtual identities, for example on social networking sites and gaming platforms, means people can control how they present themselves online. This can be used to manipulate and influence the people they are in contact with.

For example, adults can pose as young people in order to build up relationships with children. These relationships can be used to groom and sexually exploit young people.

The internet also makes it easier for adults to start relationships with new partners whilst knowing very little about them. This allows abusive adults to target vulnerable single parents, which can put their children at risk.

Children can access the internet with unsupervised contact

As children can access the internet using a range of devices and in almost any location, parents and professionals often have little or no knowledge of children and young people's online lives.

For looked after children, whose contact with their birth parents may be supervised for their own protection, this means that they are now able to 'secretly' communicate with their families via online technology. Unsupervised contact may lead to: physical harm, through secret meet-ups or accidental disclosure of location; disruption of placements; and emotional harm, through finding out unwelcome information about their birth families.

Because online communications are often private or 'secret', it is difficult for adults to identify concerns and intervene to prevent abuse. This secrecy can also prevent children from sharing their concerns with adults.

Online communities make it easier for abusive adults to contact children

Online communication makes it easier to find, contact and interact with other people. This makes it easier for abusive adults to find and build up relationships with vulnerable children and young people online.

Children and young people may feel more confident about talking to strangers online than they would in the offline world. Young people may also share personal information online without realising that this can be used by abusers to make offline contact.

The internet also enables people to connect with a community of like-minded people. This includes people who share a sexual interest in children. By creating a network of contacts with a similar outlook, sexually abusive behaviour can become normalised or even encouraged. Child sexual abuse images can be shared through these communities.

Vulnerable adults with access to children and a tendency towards abusive behaviour, can be groomed to sexually abuse children and share images.

Online contact between professionals and children

Issues may arise when professionals make contact with children in their care or with parents through social networking sites. These virtual relationships can compromise the professionalism of staff, and may lead to inappropriate levels of intimacy.

Children are less likely to view professionals, especially teachers, as protective influences if they see an inappropriate blurring of professional boundaries.

Sharing self-generated sexual images

Young people may exchange self-generated sexual images or videos through mobile phones and/or the internet (sexting). These images can easily be shared with others online. Once a picture has been sent or posted, the sender has no control over who else it is shared with and abusers may share images more widely without the young person's consent.

Exposure to harmful content

Young people may also be exposed to harmful content online, for example pro-anorexia or pro-suicide websites. These can have a powerful negative influence on a child's behaviour and encourage them to harm themselves.

Lack of awareness and understanding by professionals

Professionals may feel powerless to prevent online abuse. They may not be confident about how to talk to children and young people about online safety.

Professionals such as the police may not always understand the risk posed by perpetrators of non-contact child sexual abuse, for example those who have possessed or shared online child abuse images. This means soft intelligence (information held in police records and by specialist child abuse investigation teams) may not be shared when necessary and perpetrators may be given unsupervised access to children.

Learning for policy makers

Online safety policy

It is important for all organisations working with children to have an online safety policy for both children and staff which includes information about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour online.

Policies should cover:

- use of mobile phones, digital cameras and other communication devices
- privacy settings on social networking sites, and restrictions on professionals connecting with children and parents they work with
- what is considered appropriate and inappropriate content for adults and children
- how to report upsetting or inappropriate content and concerns about online abuse.

Organisations should also consider appointing an online safety officer to make sure the policy is followed.

Learning for improved practice where online abuse is present

Raising awareness about online safety

Professionals should receive regular training about online risks, protecting children online, and reporting concerns. Training programmes should be updated regularly to ensure frontline practitioners are kept up-to-date with new technologies and software. Parents and children should also be given the information and advice they need to help keep children safe online.

Making 'friends' online and privacy settings on social networking sites

Professionals should not communicate with children through social media or other online networking sites. Professionals should also avoid 'friending' the parents of children in their care as this blurs the lines around maintaining a professional relationship.

Managing online relationships

Professionals or carers should explain to looked after children the physical and emotional risks of unmediated contact with their birth families, and explain why contact needs to be supervised and needs to happen in a safe and neutral environment. Professionals should also engage birth parents about appropriate methods and levels of contact with their children.

Professionals should encourage children and young people to talk about what they do online and who they communicate with. The risks involved in online contact are heightened in cases where children and young people feel they have to keep their experiences secret.

Managing the impact of online sexual abuse

If there is an incident of online abuse are within a school, the senior leadership team should consider what action needs to be taken to safeguard all pupils, rather than focussing on the children directly involved. This should include talking to children and parents about the benefits and dangers of the online world and creating an open environment for people to ask questions and raise concerns.

Reporting online grooming

When a case of online grooming or sexual abuse is identified it should be reported immediately to both the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) centre and to the platform on which it took place. The police should also be contacted in cases where a child is thought to be at immediate risk of harm.

Using experts in cases involving technology

Images and messages which have been deleted from phones and computers can be retrieved by trained professionals. These professionals are able to trace perpetrators as well as other children who have been abused. The police can also use social media as a tool to identify whether a child is at risk of harm.

Cases should always be reported to the police, who have the expertise to investigate fully.

Recognising the seriousness and complexity of online abuse

Professionals should be trained to understand the way perpetrators of child sexual abuse operate online. This includes understanding how a perpetrator's behaviour may escalate from non-contact to contact abuse.

When considering whether to share soft intelligence about an adult's previous convictions for non-contact abuse, police should always prioritise the duty to protect children from harm.

Professionals should also remember that cases involving online abuse are rarely restricted to a single victim and perpetrator. The ability to connect perpetrators with other abusers and multiple victims via the internet means that reports of online abuse should always be treated as complex cases.

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