

Learning about online sexual harm

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This research report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. The research findings arising from the fieldwork do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

This research report was originally published on 14 November 2019. It was amended on 28 November as follows:

On page 2, key theme 2 was amended to clarify that children and young people need access to education for exposure to the risk of online sexual harm before spending unsupervised time online.

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Learning about online sexual harm

**Helen Beckett and Camille Warrington,
with Jacqui Montgomery Devlin**

Commissioned and undertaken on behalf of the
Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

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Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (the Inquiry),¹ as part of its investigation into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the internet. It was a small-scale, mixed-methods study which aimed to explore children's and young people's perspectives on:

- being online;
- risks of online sexual harm;
- education received about online sexual harm within state school settings;
- how such education could be improved; and
- what else should be done to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm.

Overarching themes from the research

Though a small scale study, the prioritisation of children's and young people's voices within it offers an important contribution to the existing underdeveloped research evidence base. The key themes from the research are presented below. These do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

1. Listening to the views of children and young people is critical in ensuring the ongoing development of protective efforts are relevant and beneficial.

Children and young people want to talk about these issues and have an important contribution to make.

Those who took part in the research said they valued the opportunity to think about and discuss issues of online sexual harm, an opportunity many said they had not previously had.

Across all elements of the research, participants shared insightful contributions into their online lives and how they wanted to learn about, and be protected from, online sexual harm. Finding safe and appropriate ways to further elicit these views is critical if we are to ensure that protective efforts are relevant and beneficial for children and young people.

2. Exposure to risk of online sexual harm is a common experience; children and young people need access to education that addresses this before spending unsupervised time online.

The research clearly demonstrates that children and young people are likely to be exposed to risks of online sexual harm. Many interviewees and focus group participants described this as something that occurs on a regular basis and feels like a 'normal part' of online engagement.

¹ The Inquiry was established in 2015 to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions have taken seriously their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales. The Inquiry makes recommendations for change to help ensure that children are better protected from sexual abuse, both now and in the future.

Participants demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge about different forms and sources of online sexual harm. While there was considerable familiarity with potential dangers from adult strangers, there was limited understanding of the potential for harm from peers or others within their social networks. This suggests potential gaps in the messaging children and young people receive about online sexual harm, which affects their ability to identify potential sources of harm.

As participants highlighted, it is important that they are prepared for exposure to such risks in a timely manner. Given the increasingly young age at which children are spending time online, this research suggests a need to engage children and young people in conversations about online harm from primary school age.

3. Children and young people value the opportunities that being online offers, and find overly negative and avoidance-based messaging unhelpful.

Though recognising that harmful or distressing incidents could and did occur online, most participants' perspectives on spending time online were more positive than negative. Overly negative and avoidance-based messaging, which fails to acknowledge the positive aspects of being online, is seen as unhelpful and less relevant. Children and young people want to learn about online sexual harm in a proportionate and relevant manner.

4. Schools have a vital role to play in education about online sexual harm.

Participants identified a clear role for schools to play in education about online sexual harm, and have a myriad of suggestions as to how the delivery and content of such school-based education could be improved.

Their contributions highlight the need for schools to create a safe environment for learning. This includes the creation of safety in lessons and in the wider school environment, and adopting a zero tolerance approach to all forms of abuse.

Their responses also suggest that delivering education around online sexual harm needs to be recognised as a skilled endeavour. It should be afforded a stronger status within the curriculum, and those delivering it should be appropriately trained and supported.

Given evidence that there are likely to be pupils present who have experienced online sexual harm, it is important that due regard is given to messaging. This would include potential victim-blaming messages and how reporting and access to support can be better enabled.

5. Education about online sexual harm should do more to ensure children and young people do not believe responsibility for preventing online sexual harm lies with them.

Though recognising that parents and carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, the degree to which participants indicated they felt it was up to them to avoid sexual harm was a matter of concern.

Education (both school-based and otherwise) needs to balance messaging around self-protective actions with appropriate messages about where responsibility for preventing online sexual harm lies.

Participants' strong sense of responsibility for their own safety suggests this balance has not yet been achieved.

6. Families, industry and wider society need to play their part in tackling online sexual harm.

Participants recognise that school-based education is only one part of the larger response required to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm. Families, industry and wider society all have a role to play, and participants expressed a desire to see all such parties more actively engaged in efforts to tackle online sexual harm.

Methodology

The research involved three distinct data collection activities:

- *Surveys with 213 children and young people* (aged 10–18 years; 59 percent female and 41 percent male), undertaken in one primary and five secondary state school settings in England and Wales.
- *Focus groups with 45 young people* (aged 14–16 years; 67 percent female and 33 percent male), undertaken in three of the secondary state school settings.
- *Interviews with nine young people* (aged 13–20 years; eight females and one male) who had experienced online sexual harm when aged under 18 years, undertaken in six specialist services across England.

The research design was approved by ethics committees at the University of Bedfordshire and the Inquiry.

Being online

Participants' perceptions of spending time online were generally more positive than negative. While they recognised that harmful things can and do occur, they also emphasised the positive aspects of their online lives and wanted others to acknowledge these. This was also true for interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm, although they placed more emphasis on the risks associated with being online.

When asked about the negative aspects of being online, few survey participants explicitly identified the issue of online sexual harm. Their responses focused on more general online safety issues including bullying, hacking and scamming, as well as pressures associated with prevailing popularity and approval cultures.

Participants' contributions clearly reveal that spending time online means navigating the simultaneous presence of opportunity and enjoyment alongside pressure and harm, sexual or otherwise. While it was apparent that many had developed strategies to manage this, especially as they got older, participants expressed a desire for:

- action to be taken to reduce the pressures and risks young people face online;
- further support on how to identify and manage potential risks; and
- better understanding by adults of the realities of young people's online lives, and more relevant messaging around, and responses to, this.

Knowledge of online sexual harm

The vast majority of participants demonstrated some degree of knowledge of online sexual harm. Across all ages, school was identified as the most common source of learning. Family members, friends, peers and the media were also identified as significant sources of learning, although this varied slightly according to age. Of particular note is the fact that 9 percent of secondary school survey participants said they had learned about online sexual harm from personal experience.

Although participants were familiar with the concept of online sexual harm, their responses revealed a need and desire for better understanding about it. This included information about why it occurs, different forms it can take, how to identify it, possible impacts, and what to do if it happens.

Participants' contributions suggested some potentially critical gaps in knowledge and understanding about different forms of online sexual harm and related sources of risk. For example, while most secondary school aged participants identified sexual approaches from adult strangers as harmful, they demonstrated less clarity about what constituted sexual harm within the context of peer relationships or existing online networks. This included difficulties working out when online sexual activity between peers, including within relationships, was appropriate and when it constituted a form of online sexual harm. Participants explicitly wanted more support about this issue.

The issue of sexual images received considerable attention among interview and focus group participants. Many related personal experiences in which they, or others they knew, received unsolicited explicit sexual images, or requests or coercive messages to send such images to others. This was particularly apparent for female participants, a number of whom reflected on the 'normality' of this.

"I don't think my dad realises how many messages from random boys I get or how many dick pics I get. And I have to deal with it every day ... it's kind of like a normal thing for girls now ... I've been in conversations [online] like, 'Hi. Hi. Nudes?' I'm like, 'No' ... yeah, it literally happens that quickly. Like, 'What's your age?' And you'll say how old you are, you're underage, and they'll be like, 'Oh OK', and then they'll ask for pictures."

14-year-old female interviewee

Participants reflected on how repeated exposure to such experiences could lead to desensitisation, which meant such incidents became accepted as an everyday part of life rather than something harmful to be acted on.

Both male and female participants highlighted how experiences of online sexual harm were influenced by wider harmful 'gender norms' and were part of a wider continuum of sexual harm. For boys and young men, these were noted to include myths around males not experiencing sexual harm, and an expectation that if it did occur, they should cope or 'laugh it off'. For girls and young women, impacts of gender norms included pressure to make sexual images of themselves available, and judgements that ensued whether they followed or resisted these expectations.

The significance of the online environment

Participants identified how the dynamics of online spaces presented young people with distinct risks compared with face-to-face interaction. Specific dynamics included the more anonymous nature of the internet, the disinhibition in online communication, and the global networked nature of possible unsolicited contact:

"If I saw a creepy man walking down the road, I'd walk the other way, while if a person messaged me, they had no profile picture and then they seemed normal, I'd engage in conversation because, you know, they seem normal, they don't look dangerous or harmful. So, it's like that, the way you see people, the way you view them, there's two different ways."

14-year-old female interviewee

A number of focus group participants and interviewees also identified specific protective aspects of the online environment. These included the potential ease, for some, of using 'blocking' or privacy settings in response to online sexual bullying or harassment. In other examples, online platforms were cited as a potentially helpful route to disclose experiences of harm and access support.

"You mostly end up telling them [friends] online – it's a lot easier to do it online because you don't have to see their face and you don't feel judged or you don't know if they're judging you. I told my friend online – it was a lot easier that way."

13-year-old female interviewee

Whose responsibility?

Participants' responses indicated potential concerns in relation to the degree to which children and young people saw themselves as being responsible for preventing abuse occurring. Although participants recognised that parents, carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, their contributions repeatedly suggested that they felt it was ultimately their responsibility to keep themselves safe. This emphasis on personal responsibility holds significant implications for victims' feelings of guilt and self-blame, and blame from others. In addition, this belief was noted to inhibit the likelihood of children and young people seeking and receiving support in the event of experiencing abuse.

Provision of school-based education about online sexual harm

Nearly all participants thought that schools have an important role to play in educating children and young people about online sexual harm. However, some participants noted that they had not received such education, or had received it 'too late', after they had been exposed to or experienced online sexual harm. As one 14-year-old male interviewee who experienced online sexual harm observed:

"There's no point in learning about a situation after the situation has actually goddamned happened."

14-year-old male interviewee

Participants emphasised the importance of schools educating children about online sexual harm before they start spending time on social media and other online platforms. Recognising the increasingly young age at which children may engage with social media, participants highlighted the importance of education about online sexual harm starting at primary school. They also noted the importance of school-based education being delivered on an ongoing basis, rather than as a one-off discrete input. Participants further expressed the need for education to consider the different learning styles and needs of pupils, and to use a range of engagement techniques, such as talks and videos, to meet these needs.

Participants identified a role for both schools and external organisations in delivering such education. This included bringing in those who had experienced such harm to talk about their experiences.

"By talking to people who have had those experiences it makes it a lot more real. I feel like by having other young people talking to you about it, they can connect on a more personal level than an older person who doesn't know the internet as well as a younger person."

16-year-old female survey participant

Improving school-based education to address online sexual harm

The majority of participants who had received school-based education about online sexual harm said it had been helpful in some regards. At the same time, however, participants also questioned the usefulness and relevance of current approaches, noting significant room for improvement.

Improving content

Participants identified a need for school-based education to include:

1. *The diversity of ways in which online sexual harm occurs:* participants indicated that their education about online sexual harm, to date, had presented only a partial picture about the nature of risk, often focusing on stereotypical ‘stranger danger’ images of perpetrators and abuse. This meant they struggled to identify other types of online sexual harm. Participants specifically highlighted the need for education to discuss the potential for abuse from individuals known to children and young people, including peers, friends and intimate partners.

“Obviously they can tell you, ‘Don’t talk to strangers, don’t let strangers talk to you’, and stuff, but they should also talk about people that you know and trust, or you think you trust, because they might be more of, you might be more of a target to them because they think you trust them.”

15-year-old female interviewee

2. *Potential harmful sexual behaviours by young people:* a number of participants observed how school-based education about online sexual harm needs to move beyond a focus on the behaviours of potential victims, to include consideration of young people’s responsibility not to sexually harm others.

“They always say, ‘Don’t send pictures because they might get spread’, but the only problem with that is they never say to people, ‘Don’t spread them.’”

14–16-year-old-female focus group participant

3. *Links between online sexual harm and broader issues of sex, relationships and consent:* participants described engaging with a diverse range of challenges and potential risks online. This included sexual interactions that could be either appropriate or abusive, depending on the context. Focus group participants expressed a desire for more nuanced and reflective education that acknowledges their developing sexuality and helps them navigate what this means in the online environment. Participants also highlighted a desire for education to contextualise the issue of online sexual harm within discussions about broader forms of sexual harassment and abuse.
4. *The impact of online sexual harm:* there was a clear desire for education to explore the impact of online sexual harm, supporting children and young people to understand the potentially far-reaching practical and emotional consequences of abuse. This was particularly emphasised by interviewees with personal experiences of online sexual harm who wanted others to understand the impact that it can have.

5. *How to respond to, and report, concerns:* participants observed how some children and young people will encounter online sexual harm, regardless of efforts to prevent this. Given this, they noted the need for education to address what to do if online sexual harm occurs, including providing information about available resources, where to report it, and sources of support. Some participants also highlighted the need for education to address potential barriers to reporting, such as embarrassment, shame and fear of others' reactions, and a desire for help around how to deal with the emotional impact of abuse.

"I think that they should teach us about how we should deal with these sexual harm problems. Like they tell us about it, but not how to deal with these problems ... "

"And not just telling a teacher or a mate. Just tell us how to deal with it mentally."

14–16-year-old female focus group participants

Improving tone and messaging

Participants repeatedly highlighted the limited effectiveness of overly negative or simplistic messaging, noting that such messages conflicted with the complex realities of their online lives. Participants' responses suggested that education needs to:

1. *Acknowledge the positives as well as the negatives of the internet:* there was a strong message from the majority of participants that education about online sexual harm needs to present risk proportionately. This means acknowledging the positive aspects of the internet alongside messaging about the potential risks. Participants emphasised the necessity of this for both educators' credibility and students' engagement with their messaging. As one 16-year-old female interviewee who had experienced online sexual harm explained:

"If you [teachers] sort of just come with the approach – 'this is bad' – then you just think – 'you don't understand so why should I listen?'"

16-year-old female interviewee

2. *Consider the balance between informing and scaring:* The vast majority of participants highlighted the need for education to strike a balance between presenting the risks of online sexual harm and avoiding overly fearful or alarmist messaging. The one notable exception to this message came from some of the interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm. They advocated presenting 'worst-case scenarios' and evoking fear, noting this to be driven by a desire to protect others from experiencing what they had experienced.

"If they don't know, they won't know until it's too late. It can destroy your life."

16-year-old female interviewee

3. *Avoid simplistic avoidance-based messaging:* Participants expressed a need for education to go beyond the directive, avoidance-based messages that had been typical of their experiences of online sexual harm education. They remarked on the limited effectiveness, and sometimes counter-productivity, of messaging that simply told people to do or not do something. This includes advice such as 'increase your privacy settings', 'avoid communication with "strangers" online' or 'avoid sending any messages of a sexual nature'.

"If you just get taught never talk to anyone on the internet, stay off it, you just think, 'Oh well, I'm going to ignore that', and then you don't actually know what the warning signs are, which means you go on thinking that there's not real risk and everyone's making it up."

14–16-year-old male focus group participant

Focus group and interview participants further observed that such messages sat uncomfortably with other pressures and their aspirations for popularity, status and belonging, and therefore felt unrealistic to follow.

"With school and stuff, people say, 'Have your account on private', but then, it's all about likes and followers and views nowadays ... if your account's on private, then only the people that follow you can like your things ... people don't really follow the privacy rules because then it don't really benefit them in lots of ways."

16-year-old female interviewee

Improving delivery style

Participants indicated that they valued and wanted education which provides opportunities for discussion and reflection, enabling two-way dialogue, as opposed to more didactic teaching styles. They noted the importance of creating an atmosphere that fosters openness and enables pupils to ask questions that might otherwise be difficult or embarrassing. They also emphasised benefits from recognising and integrating pupils' experiences and expertise, and involving them in setting the learning agenda. Such approaches were noted to both enhance educators' understanding of the realities of children's and young people's online lives, and make education more engaging for pupils.

Enhancing online safety: non-school-based interventions

Although the research primarily focused on school-based education, participants were also asked what else they thought could be done to help protect children and young people from online sexual harm. Participants recognised that tackling online sexual harm requires action not just by schools, but on many fronts.

1. *The role of parents and carers:* participants identified an important role for parents and carers in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, but recognised they needed access to better information and support to do this.

"I think as well as teaching young people about online safety they should actually teach young adults, adults [and] parents, because then they can warn their own children about it. Because honestly, I wish that my mum and dad spoke to me about it, and it would have saved me a lot of stress."

16-year-old female interviewee

Participants recognised that the ability to have these conversations was not just dependent on parents' knowledge, but also on the nature of parent-child relationships.

There were differing views on the legitimacy of parental monitoring and control, in light of the importance of children's and young people's privacy and independence. Achieving an appropriate balance between these concerns was recognised to be difficult and context-specific, dependent on factors such as the age of the child and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

2. *The role of the online industry*: participants identified a clear role for the online industry to play in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, suggesting that these responsibilities were not currently being fulfilled.

"I think they [online companies] have a major responsibility, and they don't do it, they don't think about it at all. On Instagram, I've seen no posts about safety."

15-year-old female interviewee

Participants identified a series of actions that those responsible for online platforms could take to enhance the safety of children and young people who used them. These included both 'designing out' risk through better privacy controls, and 'designing in' protective functions through better monitoring and reporting options. Suggestions included:

- embedding warnings and advice for users to read when signing up to social media platforms or other apps;
- improving enforcement of age restrictions;
- improving privacy settings, including the use of default privacy settings when setting up an account; and
- enhanced moderation, more accessible reporting options, and stronger action when concerns are reported.

3. *The need for societal change*: participants identified a range of ways in which their online experiences, including exposure to sexual harm, were negatively influenced by norms and pressures in society. While having fewer concrete suggestions as to how these could be addressed, participants did note the importance of wider society, including the media and celebrity culture, taking an active role to tackle them. The two main issues identified at this broader societal level were:

- harmful gender norms, and the associated normalisation of sexual violence. These were observed to influence both the risk of, and responses to, online sexual harm; and
- the undue influence of the media, celebrity culture and an online 'approval culture'. These were observed to make children and young people less likely to use privacy settings, thus increasing their potential exposure to individuals who may sexually harm them.