



NSPCC

“What should I do?”

NSPCC helplines: responding to children’s and parents’ concerns about sexual content online

In partnership with



EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Foreword by John Cameron, Head of Helplines, NSPCC	3
Foreword by Nina Bibby, Marketing & Consumer Director, O2 UK	3
Where the data comes from	4
Digital family trends: the view from O2	5
Assessing the impact of technology on family life	5
Casual connectivity	5
Exploring new frontiers together	5
Introduction	6
Online sexual abuse and exploitation	7
Who contacts us with concerns about online safety and abuse	8
Parental concern about online safety	8
Age of children	9
Young people contacting us about online sexual abuse	10
Gender of children	10
What children and parents talked to us about	11
Viewing sexually explicit images (adult pornography and child abuse images)	11
Accessing sexually explicit content	12
Impact of viewing pornography on young people	13
Fake legal threats	14
Links between viewing sexually explicit images and children generating their own sexual content	15
Child sexual abuse images	15
Sharing sexual images	16
Private images being shared more widely	17
Adults' responses to children sharing sexual images	17
Children sharing sexual images and the law	18
Online grooming and child sexual exploitation	20
Initial contact	20
Grooming	21
Meeting face to face	22
What helps children speak out about online abuse	23
References	25
Appendix	26

Foreword by John Cameron, Head of Helplines, NSPCC



Children across the UK are living in an increasing complex, competitive world where ever greater demands are being placed upon them. The rapid development of new technology and the increasing use of social media give children and young people the opportunity to talk to people who live locally, in other parts of the country and even other parts of the world. The online environment is so familiar to young people that it merges seamlessly with their offline lives. It affects how they interact with and establish, develop and maintain relationships with others.

While we recognise the significant benefits of the online world for children, there is an increasing awareness of the dangers posed to young people. The internet brings easily accessible harmful content into the home. Some children are accessing sexually explicit materials, which are distorting the way they perceive themselves and others. Some young people are finding themselves under pressure to share sexually explicit images of themselves. The internet has increased opportunities for abusers to groom children into becoming involved in harmful relationships and behaviours.

This report testifies to the experiences and concerns of children and adults about the risks that exist in the online world. Children and adults are becoming increasingly familiar with navigating the online world. But for children to remain safe, there is a growing need to improve our knowledge of the risks and how best to respond to them. It is imperative that children are able to speak out about their experiences and that parents know how to support them and what action to take to keep them safe. The NSPCC are delighted to be working with O2 to tackle this issue and offer support to parents and families across the UK. Childline, the NSPCC helpline and the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline are uniquely placed to provide information, help and assistance to children, their parents and other adults in order to prevent abuse, reduce harm and protect children.

Foreword by Nina Bibby, Marketing & Consumer Director, O2 UK



Online child safety is one of the biggest child protection issues of our generation. We all have a role to play. Tech giants and start-ups, government ministers, schools and families need to work to tackle this together. That's why a year ago, O2 joined forces with the NSPCC to form a landmark partnership to support parents to keep their kids safe online.

We're proud to run a free parent helpline, with fully trained advisers on hand to provide advice and support on all aspects of online safety for children and families. From advice on setting parental controls to dealing with cyberbullying, an overview of the latest apps to sexting or cyberbullying – the helpline enables parents get to grips with their child's online world.

To truly keep children safe online, we need to build their digital resilience to enable them to have the awareness and confidence to make the right judgement calls when needed – whether that's responding to a message from a stranger, sharing an incriminating image of a classmate or simply telling a trusted adult if they're worried.

If you're a parent, the single most important thing you can do today is to talk to your child about their online life. It is never too early, and by having open conversations with your children, whatever their age, you'll help prepare them to navigate the digital world safely and with confidence.

If you have a question about online safety, call our O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline on 0808 800 5002 or find out more about our partnership at o2.co.uk/nsppc

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Where the data comes from

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NSPCC helpline

- 0808 800 5000
- help@nspcc.org.uk
- www.nspcc.org.uk/helpline

The NSPCC helpline received almost 55,000 contacts from adults concerned about the welfare of a child in 2015/16. It is a national, 24/7 service where anyone can seek advice or report concerns for a child by phone, email, text or online form. It is run by child protection professionals, including social workers, teachers and health specialists.

Childline

- 0800 11 11
- www.childline.org.uk

Childline delivered over 300,000 counselling sessions to children and young people in 2015/16. It is a national helpline for young people, which provides a safe and confidential space for them to work through a wide range of issues. Our trained volunteer counsellors are available 24/7, and can be contacted by phone, email or 1-2-1 chat.

O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline

- 0808 800 5002

The O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline was launched in 2015, and received nearly 700 calls in its first ten months. It is open seven days a week and is run by O2 advisers trained by the NSPCC. The O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline is open to anyone with concerns about a child’s safety online not just O2’s own customers. Advisers provide help with a wide range of online safety issues for children, including parental controls, privacy settings, understanding social networks, concerns about online gaming, internet addictions, over-spending and cyber-crime. If an adviser identifies a potential child welfare concern, calls are transferred to the NSPCC helpline. 18 per cent of calls to the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline are transferred to the NSPCC for this reason.

Digital family trends: the view from O2

As more and more of us rely on digital technology for information, entertainment and navigation, our children also find the allure of the internet and digital devices equally captivating. The amount of time children spend on the internet has been steadily growing over recent years, from 10.3 hours per week in 2010, to 13.7 in 2015 (Ofcom, 2015). As 89 per cent of kids aged 12–15 say they “enjoy doing things online” (Ofcom, 2014), it seems safe to assume that this is now established childhood behaviour and is set to continue.

Assessing the impact of technology on family life

For all the benefits technology can offer, the potential threats to child safety and inter-familial relationships are very real, and we would be naïve to ignore them. From cyber-bullying and exposure to adult content, to stranger danger and sexting, the risks children face online are many and varied. However, it’s important to acknowledge the growing influence of the online world. For 65 per cent of parents “the benefits of the internet for my child outweigh any risks” (Ofcom, 2015) and digital technology is now a pervasive part of children’s education at school, as well as in their home life.

At O2, through our partnership with the NSPCC, we want to help parents gain a better understanding of their child’s online world, enabling them to identify the risks, and be confident to have timely, regular and informed conversations with their children. In fact, a YouGov poll found that 60 per cent of children are more likely to modify their behaviour online following a conversation with a parent or trusted adult (NSPCC, 2015). So while parents can sometimes feel a little overwhelmed at the pace of digital change, it’s clear that children value their advice and support.

Casual connectivity

Being too young to remember internet-free living, we suspect today’s children will feel far less anxiety about their use

of technology. It is likely they will be very open to emergent digital evolutions – a more ambient, casual connectivity that will integrate effortlessly into their lives.

While this is great for their digital literacy, it also throws up the question of just how open our lives will become as platforms offer to share our location, connect us with nearby friends, or potentially, connect us with nearby strangers, based on their seemingly similar interests. Sites that share information continuously with those nearby, and that share private information with strangers, are of particular concern in relation to protecting children from unnecessary risk. If ambient, social sharing evolves further down this path, educating children early on about the dangers as well as the delights of the online world will help to build the sound judgement and digital resilience they will need as they grow into adulthood. Early and regular conversations with children and young people about how they are engaging online are critical to understanding more about the opportunities and risks they may be exposed to – and how to navigate a fast evolving online world.

Exploring new frontiers together

The children of today have never known a world without the internet, mobile connectivity or touch screens. We can expect them to interact with a wide variety of devices, from sunrise to sunset, valuing constant multi-tasking and seamless connectivity along the way.

As we move towards more immersive tech landscapes with virtual and augmented reality, haptics (enabling users to ‘feel’ their interactions with computers through touch) and artificially intelligent bots, we can assume our children will be first in line to take part. That’s why it’s essential that we, as adults, are informed and understand the potential dangers these new worlds hold, as well as the fun they offer, so that we can help our children to navigate them safely and with confidence.

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Introduction
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Children and young people spend a lot of time online. It can be a great way for them to learn, socialise, explore, create and have fun. New technologies have brought huge benefits and opportunities for young people to explore the world and share the experiences of others. However, the online world can also present risks to young people's safety and welfare. The fast-changing pace of the digital world makes it hard for adults to understand what young people's lives look like today and how best to keep them safe from the risks.

Over the past year, we have again seen an increase in the numbers of young people and concerned adults contacting us for advice and support about how to keep children safe in the online world.

Young people contact Childline about a number of different issues relating to online safety. In 2015/16 we provided over 11,000 counselling sessions about online issues including viewing harmful or distressing content, sharing sexual content (sexting), grooming and sexual exploitation, online bullying, internet safety (including identity theft, hacking and scams) and worries about using social networking sites.

In 2015/16 the NSPCC helpline received almost 900 calls and emails from adults worried about online risks to a child.

In August 2015 we launched a multi-year partnership with O2 to help keep children safe online. A key part of this was creating and launching the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline to offer free advice to parents. In the first ten months since launching, the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline responded to nearly 700 calls. The most common reasons for calling included advice on how to set up parental controls (30 per cent of calls) and how to block access to harmful sites (10 per cent).

This report focuses on what children and adults have told us about their worries about young people accessing sexual content online. It looks at the risks posed to young people online around viewing and sharing sexual content, grooming and sexual exploitation.

At the NSPCC, as we learn more about the risks that exist in the online world, we are also learning more about how to protect children from them. We believe that it is essential that we ensure children are afforded the same protection in the online world, as they are offline; that they receive an age-appropriate, comparable level of adult protection, care and guidance in the online space as they do in the offline world. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that children are protected online from these risks, and are supported to build their resilience and provided with the tools to manage their online experiences.

We're working hard to address these issues by:

- influencing industry, government, police and other key stakeholders to do all they can to keep children safe online;
- working directly with young people, tech partners like O2 and others to co-create and develop digital solutions/products/services that ensure that minimum standards of safeguarding young children are met, and that more children know how, and are empowered to keep themselves safe online;
- building young people's digital resilience through Childline interactive content and campaigns;
- developing products, services and resources for parents, carers, professionals (e.g. teachers and social workers) and other adults to educate and support children around keeping safe online.

In addition to offering one-to-one advice through our helplines, the NSPCC and O2 jointly developed Share Aware <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/shareaware> and [Net Aware \(https://www.net-aware.org.uk/\)](https://www.net-aware.org.uk/).

Share Aware is our awareness campaign to get parents and kids talking about what is OK and not OK to share online. It includes a range of resources offering practical advice on how to talk to their children about staying safe online.

Net Aware is part of the Share Aware campaign, offering an online guide to help parents and concerned adults keep up-to-date with what’s new in social networking. It reviews privacy settings, suitable ages and appropriate content for around 50 sites.

We have also developed an e-learning course Keeping Children Safe Online for anyone who wants to know more about online safety.

We want to help every family in the UK to chat about, and understand, their child’s online world, just as they would about their day at school. That’s why the partnership between O2 and the NSPCC is so important. Together we can help parents to explore and understand the internet from their children’s perspective, and help keep children safe online.

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Online sexual abuse and exploitation
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Over the past three years we’ve seen an increase in the number of children and adults that have been contacting us about online issues, particularly online sexual abuse and exploitation, which is the focus of this report.

Three quarters (650) of the calls and emails to the NSPCC helpline about online issues in 2015/16, related to online sexual abuse. Of these, 41 per cent were serious enough to result in a referral to an external agency, such as CEOP, the police or children’s services. For the other concerns, we responded by providing advice and support to the caller. The number of referrals we have made to external agencies about online sexual abuse has increased by 35 per cent over the last three years.

One third (3,716) of Childline counselling sessions about online issues in 2015/16 were specifically about online sexual abuse. We’ve seen a 24 per cent increase in counselling about online sexual abuse over the past year and an increase of 250 per cent over the past 3 years.

This report looks at three specific aspects around online sexual abuse and exploitation: viewing sexually explicit content; sharing sexually explicit content; and grooming and sexual exploitation.

As we discuss in more detail in the report, for some children, viewing sexually explicit content is a normal stage of development because they are curious to learn more about sex. Some young people however can be upset or distressed by what they see, or it can alter their expectations about what normal relationships look like. For others, viewing such content poses the risk that they can be persuaded to share images of themselves or take part in other sexual activities on or offline.

Who contacts us with concerns about online safety and abuse

Parental concern about online safety

The biggest group of adults contacting both the NSPCC helpline and the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline was parents.

In addition, around 30 per cent of calls to the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline were from professionals. Many of these calls came from schools, wanting to support parents to keep their children safe online.

One example is Kate, who was concerned about her daughter’s activity online and decided to contact the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline. Kate was worried about what her daughter was getting up to and who she was speaking with online. The adviser was able to talk to Kate about some of the ways that she could help keep her daughter safe online. After speaking to an adviser, Kate fed back:

“The adviser I spoke to was incredibly helpful. She gave some really good pointers into all different options I could look at from a parent’s point of view. She gave me some really, really good advice, more than a listening ear, the help was practical, which was a real plus for me.”

Parents often said they felt unsure or unable to protect their children online. One caller to the NSPCC helpline told us:

“I don’t know what to do. I noticed that my daughter had been acting really secretive lately and had become really protective over her mobile phone. This made me feel a little worried and so when I got the chance I went through her social media apps and was shocked at the images she had been sending and the conversations that took place between her and some boys. I have no idea who these strangers are she is talking or sending pictures to but it was very inappropriate sexual content. I took her mobile phone off her after telling her what I found out and she became very angry and threatened to leave the house.

The relationship between us has since become really tense and she hardly speaks to me. She spends a lot of time on her mobile phone and is even more careful about leaving it around because of me. I’m starting to feel as if I have lost my daughter and I don’t know how to talk to her about the dangers of what she is doing. I dread to think what else she is sending to these boys and what this could all eventually lead to.

Can you please give me some help or advice on what I should do; I really am at the end of my tether.” (Parent, England)

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Age of children

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Parents contacting the NSPCC helpline were more likely to be calling with concerns about younger children. In contrast, children contacting Childline about online issues were more likely to be in their mid to late teens.

There could be a variety of reasons why parents call more about younger children.

Younger children may be more likely to turn to their parents for support and guidance than older children. Parents may think that parental controls are more appropriate for younger children, whereas older children are expected to have more knowledge about how to keep themselves safe, or parents may think they are less at risk from anything they might be exposed to.

Teenagers often contact us because they don’t want their parents to find out what they’ve been doing online.

Age of children	Childline		NSPCC helpline	
	% counselling sessions about online sexual abuse	No of counselling sessions	% children mentioned in contacts about online sexual abuse	No of children
11 and under	7%	209	36%	222
12–15	65%	1,977	50%	312
16–18	28%	851	14%	89
Total age known	100%	3,037	100%	623

* Age was known in 82 per cent of Childline counselling about online sexual abuse.

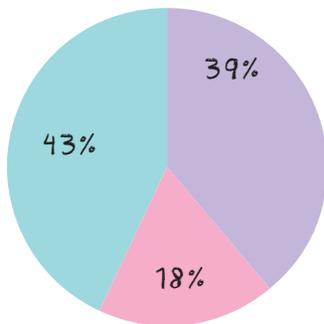
* The NSPCC helpline responded to 650 contacts about online sexual abuse concerns. 83 per cent of contacts mentioned the age of the child they were concerned about. Some contacts to the NSPCC helpline relate to more than one child.

Young people contacting us about online sexual abuse

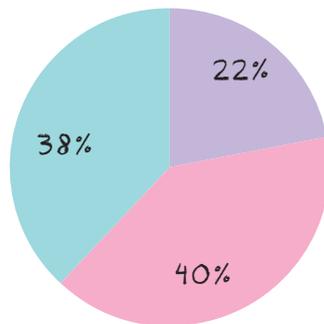
Childline counselling about online child sexual exploitation and sharing sexual images increases as young people get older. In contrast, young children are more likely to contact us about viewing sexually explicit images.

Childline counselling sessions about online sexual abuse and exploitation 2015/16 by age group

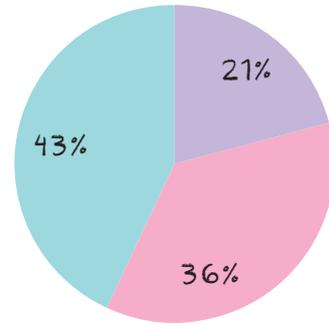
Counselling sessions with children aged 11 and under



Counselling sessions with children aged 12–15



Counselling sessions with children aged 16–18



- = viewing sexually explicit content
- = sharing sexual images
- = online child sexual exploitation

Gender of children

Girls were more likely to contact Childline about online child sexual exploitation and sharing sexual images. Boys were more likely to contact us about viewing online sexually explicit images. However, we can't be sure if this is because more girls or boys are experiencing these issues, or because, depending on their gender, young people feel more comfortable talking about some issues than others.

What children and parents talked to us about

Viewing sexually explicit images (adult pornography and child abuse images)

For children, exploring their sexuality is a normal part of growing up. However, in recent years, it has become increasingly easy for young people to access adult pornography via the internet. Of all the online issues that children and young people contact Childline about, viewing sexually explicit images saw the greatest year-on-year increase – up 60 per cent from 2014/15.

We first started recording the number of counselling sessions about viewing online sexually explicit images in 2013. Since then the number of counselling sessions has doubled from 423 to 844 counselling sessions in 2015/16. Many children also turn to the Childline website for advice about online pornography. There were nearly 20,000 visits to the online pornography advice page on the Childline website in 2015/16 – up 33 per cent compared to the previous year.

Younger children (those aged 11 and under) are more likely than 12–18 year-olds to contact us with concerns about viewing sexually explicit content online. This could indicate that as children get older, they are becoming more desensitised to adult sexual images.

The NSPCC and the Children’s Commissioner for England commissioned research from Middlesex University on the impact of pornography on young people (Martellozzo, 2016). Their survey of 1,001 young people in the UK aged 11–16 found that 65 per cent of 15–16 year-olds had viewed online pornography. The research highlights many of the same issues that children are talking to Childline about.

The research found that negative feelings towards pornography subsided through repeated viewing. When asked about how they felt about online pornography, 30 per cent of young people who continued to view pornography, said they remained curious (compared with 41 per cent when they initially saw pornography), 8 per cent remained shocked (down from 27 per cent), and 4 per cent remained confused (down from 24 per cent). On the other hand, there was an increase in young people reporting sexual arousal, from 17 per cent to 49 per cent and “feeling sexy” from 4 per cent to 16 per cent.

Accessing sexually explicit content

The majority of young people who spoke to Childline about viewing sexually explicit images told us they had accidentally stumbled upon an adult site or had received an online pop-up that redirected them to another site. Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) found that just over half of respondents to the survey (53 per cent) had seen online pornography at least once. Of these, over a quarter (28 per cent) said they had seen online pornography for the first time accidentally (e.g. via a pop-up ad), rather than being shown it by someone else or looking for it.

However, it is also becoming more common for a young person to receive images or a link directly via messaging apps. These can be from people they know or an online stranger and it is not clear that they are links to sexually explicit sites or child abuse images. Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) found almost 1 in 5 young people (19 per cent) who’d seen online pornography, said they have been shown it by someone else without asking for or expecting it.

Accessing pornography at school was a growing issue discussed in Childline counselling sessions. Young people told us about fellow pupils having pornographic images on their phone and being forced into looking at them or face being ridiculed for refusing. Young people talked about pornographic images and videos being circulated via mobile phone or online, and how disturbed and upset they were by what they had viewed.

*“I have been bullied into watching pornographic videos by people at school, which makes me feel sick. One showed a woman being raped, it was so upsetting. They have been bullying me for a while now and I am feeling sad, depressed and sometimes have suicidal thoughts.”
(Boy, 13)*

Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) found that fewer than 1 in 5 (19 per cent) of young people who had seen sexually explicit content had deliberately searched for it.

The NSPCC helpline also hears from worried parents who have discovered pornographic material on their child’s electronic devices and don’t know what to do. One concerned mother contacted the NSPCC helpline requesting advice about her 11-year-old daughter:

“I have recently found out that my daughter has been watching pornography online. When I found out I spoke to her and explained it was wrong to do this. After our conversation I increased the security on her device and I believed she had stopped. However, I have just found that she has been watching it on another device and it is even more explicit. We talked to her again and asked her about how she came about the sites. At first she said she found it herself but then confessed that my friend’s child, who is younger, showed her it and they had watched it together. I have now confiscated all devices, but am not sure if or how to tell my friend and whether I should inform the school? I am not sure how to cope with this.”

In the majority of cases parents contacted the NSPCC helpline asking for advice on how to prevent their child from accessing inappropriate content after they had discovered their child had viewed it. Parents were upset and shocked with the sexually explicit material they had discovered on their child’s device. As in the case study, many parents reported that they had confiscated their children’s devices because they didn’t know what else to do. Our helplines were able to talk them through alternative responses. We advise parents that, rather than taking away devices and risk their children becoming more secretive about their online activity, it is

better to use the opportunity to talk about healthy relationships. Discussions can help children to understand that pornography is not always a realistic representation of sex and think about how they can resist pressure from their peers to do things they feel uncomfortable with. Parents can also install parental controls to help protect their children from viewing age-inappropriate material.

Lisa called the O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline to ask for advice because her 9-year-old daughter had made inappropriate searches on Google after somebody in school told her to. Lisa wanted to know if this needed reporting and if there is anything we can do to help. The O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline adviser was able to talk to Kate about why it was important to tell the school, so that they could ensure all pupils were aware of the risks of accessing unsafe content online.

“This service was incredibly helpful to us as parents concerned about the internet safety of our children. This is increasingly important as our kids grow up and live in the fast-paced world of social media. The adviser told us about the Wi-Fi safety we could set up. We had never heard of that before. Our home Wi-Fi is now protected for all devices and this is something so helpful to us. The adviser was fantastic and very understanding to us.”

Impact of viewing pornography on young people

Although many young people stumble across sexually explicit content accidentally the first time they see it, many then choose to view it again (Martellozzo, 2016). Most were drawn to online pornography through normal curiosity and the excitement of engaging in online sexual activity. However, some young people told Childline that they were worried about how much pornography they were watching.

Some young people told us how visiting adult sites had become part of their daily routine. Those who regularly viewed adult

sites usually did so for a considerable amount of time. But some young people contacted us because they were worried they were watching too much pornography. They wanted reassurance about whether they were normal.

Many young people sought advice from Childline about ways they could reduce the amount of pornography they viewed. They told counsellors that they felt too uncomfortable broaching the problem with those around them, thinking they would be regarded as weird or perverted. One 11-year-old girl told Childline:

“I was online and someone I had never heard of before messaged me and told me to check out this website. It was a porno website and ever since I looked at it I have become addicted and I just feel weird. I am really ashamed and now I am getting emails from tons of porn sites. I am so scared my mum is going to find out. How can I stop?”

Some told Childline that they stayed up so late watching pornography, they struggled to concentrate at school the following day because they were so tired. Lack of sleep was resulting in problems concentrating and mood swings, and their schoolwork was suffering.

Other children felt that exposure to pornography was affecting their relationships. Girls in particular spoke to Childline about being exposed to pornography and feeling pressurised into re-enacting what was shown on these films.

“My boyfriend told me he likes watching porn so I said I’d watch it with him. I wish I hadn’t because since then I’ve felt really insecure about my body. All the girls in the porn films were so pretty and perfect, so it’s left me feeling fat and ugly. I’m really down and depressed knowing that’s what I’m being compared to but my boyfriend doesn’t seem to understand why I’m upset. I don’t know who to talk to about how I’m feeling because I don’t want to tell anyone that I’ve been watching porn.” (Teenage girl)

In a Childline online survey in 2013 of almost 700 respondents, 60 per cent said that pornography had influenced how they thought about relationships. Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) also found that girls were worried that watching pornography was affecting the way that boys thought about sex. The survey indicated that higher proportions of boys thought that pornography was realistic than girls (53 per cent compared with 39 per cent).

Parents also contacted the NSPCC helpline wanting advice on how they could assess the emotional impact of what their child had seen and how they should talk to their child about what they had discovered:

*“My daughter told me that her friend had shown her porn videos online which made her feel very uncomfortable. They were sexually graphic and violent and I’m upset my daughter was shown this. I don’t really know how to approach the topic of porn with my daughter. I’ve told her it’s wrong and I have spoken to the friend’s mother about my concerns. The mother thinks it’s a phase children go through and brushed the conversation off. I am worried she could be showing other children or something else could be going on. What should I do?”
(Parent, England)*

Fake legal threats

We are starting to hear from young people who have received what appears to be an online legal notice while browsing the internet.

Young people have told us that notices pop up on screen, telling them they could be prosecuted and/or fined for visiting an inappropriate site. The message often shows the geographical area where the

young person lives. These notices, which look genuine, are actually ransomware and can freeze the young person’s computer. This type of malware works by presenting an official looking warning on screen which appears to be accusing them of accessing child abuse images. It tells them that their IP address is under investigation by the police and instructs them to pay a fine in order to unlock their computer. One young person who had received one of these warnings contacted Childline in a panic saying:

“I think I accidentally opened a porn website which contained child pornography, because there was like a blockage from the police, and now I’m worried that the police are after me. It said something about this site being restricted and the childhood protection act on pornography, but it was just an accident that I opened the website, I didn’t go looking for it or anything. There was also something about a £100 fine, but I don’t know if that was from the police or the website?”

Young people contact Childline feeling scared but too embarrassed to ask their parents for help, often because they were browsing pornography at the time. Fortunately when they contact Childline we can reassure them that these are scams, help them to report it and better protect themselves online in the future.

From this point onwards we will focus on online child protection issues. If an O2 & NSPCC Online Safety Helpline adviser identifies a potential child welfare concern, calls are transferred to the NSPCC helpline for further support. For this reason the rest of this report relates exclusively to analysis of NSPCC helpline and Childline data.

Links between viewing sexually explicit images and children generating their own sexual content

Some young people also reported that viewing sexually explicit images had led them towards more potentially risky online activity, including engaging in sexual activities online. One child told us:

“I was feeling lonely and depressed and my easy access to porn made me want more and more. By the time I was 15, I had seen so much it no longer satisfied me so I tried cybersex. I used to masturbate in chat sites for other people because I was so sexually frustrated. I am now really regretting what I’ve done and am worried that it may come back to haunt me, as I could have been video recorded in the chat sites. This has taken a big toll on my education and social life and I don’t know if I’ll ever stop feeling depressed about what I did.”

Issues around self-generated sexual images are looked at in more detail in the next section.

Child sexual abuse images

Although the majority of contacts Childline receives are from young people who had viewed adult pornography, there was a small minority who had viewed child sexual abuse images via the internet. Most of these images had been accessed unintentionally, for example after clicking on a pop-up or an unknown link. Young people contacting Childline after seeing these images often felt scared, like one 15-year-old boy who called and said:

“I was watching pornography and pop-ups appeared, so I went to close them but accidentally opened one which involved child pornography, which was horrible. I know it is wrong and I am worried that the police will find out and think I did it on purpose. I feel like I have let everyone down opening it and I just want to do the right thing but I don’t know what I can do?”

We are conducting further research into child abuse images and will be publishing our findings later in October 2016.



Sharing sexual images

Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) suggests that only a small minority (13 per cent) of young people have taken and shared sexual images of themselves.

Over a third of Childline’s counselling sessions about online sexual abuse worries relate to sexting (sending and receiving sexual content). In 2015/16 there were 1,392 Childline counselling sessions with young people worried about sexting. The number of counselling sessions about sexting over the past three years has almost quadrupled, up from 351 counselling sessions in 2012/13. Sexting was also the most popular advice page on the Childline website. There were almost 185,000 visits to the sexting advice page on the Childline website in 2015/16.

Although Childline most commonly heard from girls about this issue, there were also counselling sessions with boys who had been targeted by girls. The majority had been sent naked pictures without requesting them, making them feel vulnerable and uncomfortable as highlighted in the example below:

“I have been chatting to a girl from school online. She showed me inappropriate pictures of herself. I felt really uncomfortable with it and I am scared I will get into trouble. I told her how it made me feel but she didn’t listen and kept sending me more. She laughed at me and called me names and now everyone at school thinks there is something wrong with me and say mean things.” (Boy, age unknown)

Children and young people had lots of different ways of talking about sharing sexual images. A survey with over 5,000 Childline users found that the most common way of referring to them was “nudes”. Other popular terms were “pictures”, “pic for pic”, “dirties” and “DPs”. Pictures can range from posing in underwear to full exposure of genitalia or performing a sexual act via webcam/video or live streaming.

Many young people reported feeling pressurised to generate “nude selfies” and send them to their peers via smartphones, predominantly as a way to communicate their interest. Young people who told Childline about sending naked/semi-naked images of themselves, spoke about feeling like it was expected of them, and something that everyone was doing. This may suggest that, for a vulnerable group of children, a perception that sending nude pictures is a normal part of life is being exploited to get them to share images themselves.

We have started to hear more from young people who have engaged in online sexual role play, which usually involves role playing sexual acts or fantasies. One young girl contacted Childline after she had engaged in sexual role play online:

“I have this game on my iPad where you can talk to kids all over the world and I made friends with a boy and he forced me into doing a role play with him. I feel so disgusted and ashamed of myself. Nearly every conversation we had, he tried to make sexual. Now I’m too scared to go back on that game – I realise now he could have been anyone.”

Although some young people are sharing sexual images and engaging in sexual role play with online strangers, in most cases they are sharing with people they know, most frequently someone they believe they are or would like to be in a relationship with. Our research (Martellozzo, 2016) found that half (55 per cent) of the young people who said they had ever taken a nude selfie had shared it with someone else. Of the young people who had shared a nude selfie, the

majority (61 per cent) had shared it with someone they knew.

Private images being shared more widely

Sometimes young people share an image with one person, who then shares it with others. We hear from young people, mostly girls, who agreed to send their boyfriends a nude selfie believing that the boy would keep their photos private, but that trust has been abused and the image circulated. In the majority of cases the girl shared the image understanding the risks but did not believe their boyfriend would share the images with others, like one 13-year-old girl who told Childline:

“A few weeks ago my boyfriend who is the same age as me asked me to send nude pictures of myself to him. I sent them and he shared them everywhere online. My friends are now calling me a ‘slag’. We have now split up and I have blocked him on every account I have. I reported it to the site but it was pointless as the pictures are still circulating – I am devastated.”

Another girl, aged 16, contacted after her ex-boyfriend started to distribute her photos. She said:

“My ex took explicit photos of me after we’d had sex; the photos were taken without my consent and showed my face. They’ve started being sent round my school and I can’t cope with what people are thinking and saying about me. I hate this lack of control. I don’t feel like it’s my own body anymore. Is there anything I can do to stop this or will I get the blame, because I heard that sending a nude photo of yourself counts as distributing child porn?”

In most cases where the young person had private images of them shared, the images had been circulated among school friends. This makes the situation worse as, not only have private images of the young person been seen by their peers, but also the young person has often experienced bullying,

name calling and being ostracised by their friends.

These experiences left young people in a vulnerable position that they did not know how to get out of.

Childline is working with the Internet Watch Foundation to help children who have lost control of a sexual image to get the image removed. In 2013 we launched Zipit – a free app for young people to use in response to requests for naked or explicit pictures. The app, developed with young people, features funny images young people can use to help them respond to peer pressure to share explicit images. It also provides advice for how to have safe chats with peers online and includes a way to call Childline straight from the app.

One young person spoke to Childline about downloading the app after an upsetting experience of sharing a naked image of themselves.

“I sent my boyfriend this nude photo of myself thinking that he would keep it private. But he sent it to some of his mates and now it’s got around school and I feel so awful. I have downloaded the Zipit app and am going to have a look at it, so something like this won’t happen again. I wish I had known about it before, because sending that picture was the worst thing I have ever done.”

Adults’ responses to children sharing sexual images

A high proportion of contacts from parents to the NSPCC helpline are received after they had discovered their child had been sharing sexual images online. One parent said:

“I’m worried about my son who has been exchanging sexual images with this girl he knows. I caught him a few months ago doing it and I did my utmost to make sure that he understood the consequences of this behaviour but despite this, I think he is still exchanging pictures with this girl. I don’t know what to do.”

Another parent asking for advice on how to handle such a situation said:

“I’ve just found out my daughter has been sent some nude selfies on this instant messaging app. She had been speaking to these people and they started sending her inappropriate images and asked her to send them things. They haven’t threatened her but I think she was worried about getting into trouble, so that’s why she told me about it. She knew that she was too young to go on this app in the first place, so I don’t think she will do it again. I just wanted to get some advice on how I can report this and make sure it doesn’t happen to her again.”

When schools became aware that sexual images were being shared, many intervened by contacting parents. Young people were often horrified at their parents finding out and were distraught at the thought of having to face their parents alone.

“I am really worried! I sent a rude photo to my friend and he has shared it with other people and now it has gone around the whole school. Lots of people have seen the photo and the school have found out and rung my parents today. I am too scared to go home and face my mum. I am worried that things will get out of hand at home and there will be a violent reaction.”
(Girl aged 13)

To help schools address this complex issue, the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) Education Group has published advice for schools and colleges on responding to incidents of sexting. This includes: responding to disclosures; handling devices and imagery; risk assessing situations; involving other agencies; information about preventative education; working with parents; reporting imagery to providers https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/545997/Sexting_in_schools_and_colleges_UKCCIS_4_.pdf.

Children sharing sexual images and the law

Confusion around the legalities of sharing sexual images was a common concern for young people and parents.

Sexting research commissioned by the NSPCC from Facts International found that, a survey of 1,000 parents of children aged between 11 and 18 years, half of parents (50 per cent) were unaware that it is illegal for a young person to take a naked image of themselves. Over a quarter of parents (28 per cent) didn’t know that it’s illegal for a child to send a naked image of themselves to another child. For more information see our summary to the research on the NSPCC website <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2016/sexting-young-people-parents-view/>.

Under the Protection of Children Act 1978 and the Criminal Justice Act 1988 anyone in possession of indecent images or videos of somebody who is under 18 would technically be in possession of an indecent image of a child – even if they are the same age. If a young person is under the age of 18 and sends, uploads or forwards an indecent image or video on to friends or partners this would also be breaking the law, even if they are ‘selfies’.

While parents and their children should be aware of the law, we need to ensure that young people do not end up scared to report online abuse incidents for fear of getting themselves or their friends into trouble.

Case study

Lucy’s mum contacted the NSPCC helpline for advice after Lucy told her she had shared a picture of herself.

Lucy joined an online forum and started to talk online and via mobile phone to a boy she met on there. Over a period of time they developed feelings for one another but never met in person.

On one occasion the boy began to speak to Lucy about trust. He told her that he trusted her and that she should also trust him in return. He then requested that Lucy sent him an image of herself. Lucy sent a topless image (face included) via Facebook messenger. The boy responded with negative comments about her body. He told Lucy that he had sent the image to his best friend who also made negative comments about the picture. Naturally this left Lucy distraught and hurt. She continued to try and please her online boyfriend by sending him different images that were more flattering in desperate hope he would say something positive about the way she looked.

Shortly after this incident an assembly took place at Lucy’s school in which staff spoke about the dangers of ‘sexting’, and warned the children that it was illegal to

send an indecent image of a child and this action could land them on the sex offenders register. The topic of ‘sexting’ was brought up again in PHSE and a teacher reiterated again that children could end up on the sex offenders register for sending indecent images of a child. This caused Lucy to panic as she believed she would be arrested by the police if they became aware of what had happened to her.

Petrified and embarrassed, Lucy eventually plucked up the courage to tell her mother about what had happened, but begged her mum not to tell the police because she believed she would be arrested.

Lucy’s mother initially contacted the NSPCC helpline because she knew she could speak confidentially and wanted to understand the legalities around what her daughter had done. After talking to a practitioner, she agreed to make a referral and was able to reassure Lucy that she would not be arrested.

Fortunately Lucy had a good relationship with her mother and was able to turn to her for support, but there are many other young people who find themselves in this situation and feel there is nobody they can tell, and so the cycle continues or worsens.

In response to concerns about unnecessarily criminalising young people, police have introduced a new crime recording code, Outcome 21. This means that police will be given the discretion to say that it is not in the public interest for further action to be taken. It is unlikely that crimes recorded under Outcome 21 will be disclosed during criminal record checks, which should help schools and parents be confident about getting support from the police. New police guidance is also due to be published to help police understand sexting, respond

to sexting in a child-centred way and understand in what context Outcome 21 should be used.

The NSPCC has developed guidance for parents to help them talk to children about the risks of sharing sexual images, what the law says and what to do if their child has shared a sexually explicit image and it is being circulated online or among their peers. You can find out more on the NSPCC website <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/sexting>

Online grooming and child sexual exploitation

The other main concern that children and parents contact us about relates to young people being groomed and sexually exploited while online.

Many young people use social networking sites to make new friends, particularly if they are struggling with problems at home or at school. The internet has made it much easier for an abuser to make contact with a vulnerable young person, often while pretending to be another child.

Some young people find that they are then asked to send sexual images to the abusers, or they make arrangements to meet them face-to-face.

In 2015/16 there were 1,480 Childline counselling sessions about online child sexual exploitation (up 18 per cent since 2014/15, when we first started recording online sexual exploitation as a separate issue). We had over 13,000 visits in 2015/16 to the advice about online grooming on the Childline website.

Initial contact

Young people who contacted Childline about online sexual abuse had often been experiencing other problems in their lives at the time, which had left them particularly susceptible to grooming. In 35 per cent of sexual abuse/online sexual abuse counselling sessions, young people talked about how they were struggling with issues such as low self-esteem, depression, self-harm and suicidal feelings. Young people told us their groomer was initially attentive, had listened, sympathised and seemed to be the only person who really understood and cared about them. Loneliness, social isolation and family problems were other common factors that made young people more vulnerable to grooming.

“I was sexually abused for years and now suffer from anxiety, depression and sometimes self-harm to cope with the flashbacks. I recently met someone online who I thought was amazing. He’s a lot older than me but was really sweet, kind and considerate. I felt as if he was the only person I could talk to about things that have happened in my past and my mental health issues without being judged. He asked me to send him a nude selfie of myself, but I refused and he’s become really horrible towards me now. I’m really confused and hurt because I thought we loved and cared about each other.” (Girl, 16)

Online groomers used a number of different forums to contact children. One area where we are seeing a growing number of young people talking about being groomed is online dating sites. Online dating sites provide an environment where it is expected that online conversations would potentially lead to relationships and meeting up offline.

One young person told Childline:

“I went on this dating site a while back because I felt really alone and needed someone to talk to who could build my confidence. I met someone I liked and we chatted for a couple of weeks, but now he wants to meet up. He is being quite persistent and has turned a bit nasty now, because I’m still not sure whether I am ready to go through with it. I’m scared and worried I have got in too deep.” (Girl, 12–15)

Grooming

Girls told Childline how the groomer had made them feel wanted and special and frequently paid them compliments. Despite often having never met the online contact in person, young people described real feelings and trust for the person they were communicating with. Children and young people frequently did not recognise that they were being groomed, as they believed they were in a relationship.

Young people spoke about online conversations becoming more and more sexualised, sometimes over a long period of time, but sometimes quite quickly. Children spoke of feeling scared and uncomfortable when they started being asked for ‘nude selfies’. But they often said they were afraid of causing upset or hurt, or of being dumped by their online boyfriend. So they felt coerced into complying.

Once the first picture had been sent, young people reported being bombarded with requests for more explicit images or to take part in sexual activity online. When young people refused, the abusers often threatened to upload pictures to the internet, leaving the young person believing they have no choice but to carry out their continuing demands. Young people were left feeling harassed, scared and unable to escape from the situation.

“I met this guy through social media and he was really nice at first. He told me that he loved me and that I was really beautiful. I felt as if I could talk to him about anything; he always listened to my problems at home and I thought he really cared. When he asked me to send him topless photos of myself I didn’t think too much about it and sent him a few. But now he’s threatening to post these online if I don’t keep sending him more. He’s turned really nasty and I’m scared that everyone will find out what I’ve done. I’m really worried but I’m too embarrassed to talk to anyone about it. Please help.” (Girl, 15)

Consistent grooming themes included:

- manipulation
- deception
- regular/intense contact
- secrecy
- sexualisation
- kindness and flattery
- isolating from friends and family
- supplying gifts
- threatening behaviour
- blackmail

The NSPCC helpline also heard from anxious parents who found worrying online conversations between their child and someone who they suspected was an adult. In many of these cases the parent had become concerned because they thought their child was hiding something from them. They often described their child as becoming more secretive, less communicative and overly protective of their devices such as shielding their phone screens or quickly closing pages down on their laptops. There was often an element of uncertainty about whether someone was being groomed where the age gap between the child and the groomer was comparatively small. It seemed that a general perception of a “groomer” was a man in their 40s or 50s. So when the groomer was in their late teens/early twenties, parents were sometimes unsure about whether it was grooming or a genuine relationship.

Case study

We heard from Brenda, who was concerned about her 16-year-old daughter Lizzie being groomed by a 21-year-old man.

Brenda had suspected something was not right with her daughter Lizzie due to her unusual behaviour. Realising that there was something going on online, Brenda decided she would take a look at Lizzie’s laptop when she was at school.

Brenda was horrified to find a number of private messages on Lizzie’s social networking site from a 21-year-old man who had initiated sexualised conversations and requested naked pictures.

Brenda was in disbelief as she saw that her daughter had shared a number of photos of herself in her underwear or semi-naked for which she was paid several compliments on how pretty she looked and what a great body she had.

At the time Brenda looked at the messages, the male contact had been communicating with Lizzie in this way for a number of weeks and was now asking for her to come

to his house for a sleepover, with promises of providing her with alcohol. He had asked Lizzie for her home address, so he could pick her up in his car. With great relief Brenda could see there was no exchange of address on the messages she was reading, but she could not be certain that they had not arranged to meet somewhere.

Brenda decided to contact the NSPCC helpline and shared her doubts about what she had uncovered, and worried that she was being overly protective of her teenage daughter. Having spent some time talking through her concerns, she agreed to make a referral to the police.

Fortunately for Lizzie, her mum had picked up on something not being right, and sought support, but others are not so fortunate. Until recently, it would not have been illegal for an adult to send a sexual message to a child. The NSPCC’s Flaw in the Law campaign successfully called for a change in the law to make this a criminal offence. However, this law has yet to come into force.

Meeting face to face

Grooming and sexual exploitation can happen in the online world without the child ever meeting the abuser in real life. However, sometimes young people tell us that their relationship with their groomer felt so rewarding and real that they had agreed to meet in person. Once they had met, the grooming process continued with the abuser giving the young person gifts, money, alcohol or drugs as well as compliments and affection.

The young person thought they were in a serious relationship and felt under pressure to agree to the abuser’s demands to engage in sexual activity. The abuser was able to use the young person’s age and immaturity against them, suggesting that the young person was “not mature enough” for them to be together sexually and threatening to leave the young person if they did not comply. The fear of losing the person they loved, meant the abuser could emotionally manipulate them into having sex, sometimes including sex with other people as well.

If young people in this situation do recognise that the other person’s behaviour is abusive, they are often convinced they themselves are to blame.

One 14-year-old girl contacted Childline about her older boyfriend, who she had initially met online:

“I just wanted to ask a question. This guy I’m seeing makes me have sex with people and then he gives me money, drugs and alcohol – does that make me a prostitute?”

We sleep together and I really love him, but I wish I didn’t have to sleep with other people. I only agree because I don’t want him to hate me.

I don’t get on with my family; they are always on my case. My boyfriend means everything to me and I spend most of my time with him. I do have a few friends but he doesn’t really like me talking to people, because he says he would get into trouble if my friends found out his age. I sometimes feel so lonely and just wish it could be just me and him, and he didn’t have to involve all these other men.

Sometimes I wonder if he is using me, but I know he loves me because he gets me lots of things and does lots of things for me, and he treats me like an adult and understands me. Nobody else likes me and he makes me happy. He tells me all the time how much he loves me and listens to me when nobody else cares. If we split up, I would have no one.”

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What helps children speak out about online abuse

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In most cases involving online grooming and sexual exploitation the young person told us they didn’t feel they could seek support anywhere else. They were reluctant to tell anyone they knew about what was happening, believing nobody would understand what they had done or that they would be judged for their actions. Of the children who we counsel about sexual abuse and exploitation, one in three tell us that they haven’t spoken to anyone else about it.

Many young people believed they were to blame for initiating or maintaining online contact with their abuser. They described feeling ashamed of how they had behaved and couldn’t believe that what had started out as a bit of flirtatious fun had spiralled out of control.

Many young people told us about their fear of their parents finding out, worrying that it would make things worse at home, particularly where family relationships were already difficult. Childline provided children with a safe, confidential space where they could talk about their worries.

Young people found it difficult to speak out about grooming and child sexual exploitation because:

- they are afraid because of the groomer’s threats of violence
- they have been told by their groomer that they won’t be believed
- they have established an emotional attachment with the abuser, and do not wish to get them into trouble or they refuse to believe they are being groomed;
- they feel dirty and ashamed and are too embarrassed to share the sexual details of what has been happening to them. The feelings of self-blame make it difficult to talk to anyone about what has happened.

When young people did pluck up the courage to speak to Childline, they told us they had contacted us because they:

- were feeling upset or confused about how their “partner” was treating them, but didn’t recognise they were being groomed
- had been told by someone else (friend, parent, school, police) they were being groomed, but felt angry and refused to believe it
- were thinking about meeting an online contact in person and were unsure whether they should or not.

“My friend thinks I’m being groomed but I don’t think that’s true – I think she’s just jealous. I’ve met a guy and he’s a lot older than me. He’s always telling me that I’m perfect and that he wishes I was older. More recently he’s been asking me to meet up with him but wants me to come alone, which I said I’m not comfortable with but he’s not agreeing to it. I don’t want him to get into trouble, which is why I don’t want to say anything but I don’t want to meet him alone either. I don’t know what to do.” (Girl, 13)

Some young people contacted us because they wanted help with how they could escape from their situation. These young people talked about:

- how the situation had escalated and the risks were higher – they may have been asked to meet face to face (if grooming has taken place online) or offline situations had become more threatening
- getting support and encouragement from friends that had helped them recognise that their relationship was abusive and prompted them to reach out for help
- being frightened by threats of exposure or the actual exposure of sexually explicit images or videos involving them
- needing additional support during or after an investigation following reporting their experiences to the police.

Where the young person had told their school or the police about what had happened to them, they had not been prepared for the level of questioning they faced. Many told Childline that they had felt too ashamed to provide all the details of what had happened, so chose to hold information back.

“I was being groomed online by men and it went on for years. Then people started finding out and getting involved. They didn’t know the full extent, but I spoke to the police. When they questioned me I felt so ashamed, so I didn’t tell them the full story. I feel like such a coward. I tried to kill myself recently because it’s constantly on my mind.” (Female, 12–15)

#ListenToYourSelfie campaign

To help young people recognise the signs of grooming and unhealthy relationships, both online and offline, we developed our #ListenToYourSelfie campaign. In September 2016 we launched 2 short films based on a same-sex online grooming scenario and a peer to peer sexual pressure and grooming.

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/unhealthy-relationships-highlighted-new-childline-campaign/>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/friends-relationships-sex/sex-relationships/healthy-unhealthy-relationships/listentoyourselfie-lara-and-paul-stories/>

Through listening to what children and young people are telling us, it is clear that many feel responsible, at least in part, for the abuse and exploitation they have experienced. They are scared or ashamed to speak out. Or they are worried that they, or others, will get into trouble.

Children and young people need to feel that they can talk to their parents, or other trusted adults, if they are worried. Adults need to respond in a calm and reassuring way to children who find the courage to speak out. Where concerns about abuse are

reported to the authorities, young people need to be appropriately supported to share all the relevant information. This will help professionals to identify action that could be taken to protect other children.

The NSPCC is working to help all children feel safe and supported when they disclose abuse. Our It’s Time campaign is calling for all children who have experienced abuse to have access to the support they need, and our Order in Court campaign is calling for changes to our justice system to make it fair, age appropriate and fit for children.

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Appendix

When someone contacts the NSPCC helpline or Childline, the counsellor records and codes details from the counselling session in order to capture the nature of the issues discussed.

Childline has a series of thematic reporting codes, which are used to classify these counselling themes. As counselling sessions about online abuse have increased and new issues have emerged, we’ve introduced new reporting codes to capture what children are telling us about online sexual abuse issues. These include:

- sharing sexual images (sexting)
- online grooming
- online child sexual exploitation

- viewed online sexually explicit material/ pornography
- online safety (including identity theft, hacking and scams)
- social networking/gaming/chat/dating site issues

Reporting codes are reviewed regularly to help us identify emerging trends. This means there is limited quantitative data available for some of the issues discussed in this report, as the issues are so new they have not yet, or have only recently, been assigned a code. To address these gaps, we have used qualitative analysis of what children and young people have been telling us to paint a clearer picture of their experiences online.

Childline counselling sessions about online sexual abuse – 2015/16

Main concern	Age breakdown				Total number of counselling sessions (all ages)	Percentage of counselling sessions about online sexual abuse (all ages)
	11 and Under	12–15	16–18	Unknown		
Viewing sexually explicit material online	81 39%	434 22%	179 21%	150	844	23%
Sharing sexual images	37 18%	783 40%	306 36%	266	1,392	37%
Online child sexual exploitation	91 43%	760 38%	366 43%	263	1,480	40%
Total online sexual abuse	209 100%	1,977 100%	851 100%	679	3,716	100%

Age was known in 82 per cent of counselling sessions about online sexual abuse

Find out more about our work at
[nspcc.org.uk](https://www.nspcc.org.uk)