



Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Online Sexual Abuse Factsheet (COVID-19)

Children and young people may become more isolated and lonely as lockdown continues and they will be spending more and more time online. The NSPCC has warned that this, combined with a shortage of moderators who combat sexual abuse online has created ‘a perfect storm’ for abusers to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent article in The Guardian (April 2020) notes that Europol, the law enforcement agency of the European Union, said it had seen “increased online activity by those seeking child abuse material”.

Staff, volunteers, and parents and carers in particular, should be aware of what their children and young people are doing online and educate them about how to stay safe. They should be vigilant to possible signs of abuse and encourage children and young people to tell them if anything or anyone makes them feel uncomfortable.

Online abuse can happen on any device connected to the web. Children and young people use text messaging, email, apps, online chats and gaming sites regularly to communicate, and abuse can occur via any of these means. It can include children and young people being persuaded or forced to send sexually explicit images of themselves, or take part in sexual activities or conversations. It also includes exposing or flashing, or showing a child or young person pornography.

Children and young people are often ‘groomed’ for the purposes of sexual abuse or exploitation online. Grooming can also happen online or in person, with groomers hiding their true intentions.

There are generally 6 stages of grooming:

- **Targeting the child/young person.** The groomer will identify some type of vulnerability within the child/young person.
- **Gaining the child/young person’s trust.** The groomer will gain their trust by gathering information about the child, their needs and how to fill them. They make the child feel understood and valued.
- **Filling a need.** Once the groomer has figured out what the child’s needs are, they begin to fill the void e.g. drink, drugs, somewhere to stay, gifts, but most significantly, the groomer will make the child feel loved and special.
- **Isolating the child/young person.** The groomer will encourage the child to sever protective contacts with family and friends and assume a protective and understanding position.



- **Sexualising the relationship.** After trust has been gained the groomer progressively sexualises the relationship e.g. watching pornography and having sexual contact.
- **Maintaining control.** Once the sexual abuse has begun, the abuser will use secrecy, blame and threats to manipulate the child into silence and participation, e.g. threats against the child's family and friends or to circulate indecent/abusive images.

Possible indicators

A child or young person who is being sexually abused online may:

- become increasingly secretive about their use of technology and not talk openly about their online activity
- hide what they have on screen when someone enters the room
- become more possessive of their device(s) and worried if someone else looks at it
- spend more or less time online than usual
- show sudden, unexplained personality changes
- be upset or angry after being online.

Responding and Reporting

If a child or young person tells you that they are being abused, it is important that you respond appropriately. You must listen carefully, express concern and sympathy, and reassure them they have done the right thing in telling you. Explain that you cannot promise to keep secrets, don't press them for more details or start to investigate. Make a written record of the disclosure. If you work with children and young people, your organisation should have a form for this.

If you have concerns that a child or young person is at risk of online abuse, or a child makes a disclosure to you, report this to the appropriate organisation or authorities.

If you are a friend, relative or neighbour of the child or adult, you can contact the relevant Health and Social Care Trust Gateway Team or PSNI.

Contact numbers (including out of hours) can be found [here](#).

If you have any concerns about a child or young person you are working with, follow your organisation's reporting procedures and contact the Designated Officer. If you cannot reach the Designated Officer, you can contact the relevant agency directly- [Who to contact if you suspect abuse, exploitation or neglect | nidirect](#)



Preventing online sexual abuse

Staff, volunteers, parents and carers should talk to children and young people about what they are doing online, how they communicate and who they communicate with.

Warn them about the dangers:

- Not everyone online is who they say they are. People can lie and set up fake profiles.
- Information on the internet is not always accurate and it's best to check with someone who knows.
- Don't share personal information online, e.g. their email address, phone number or passwords.
- Meeting someone they have only been talking to online is very dangerous.
- Tell their parent, carer or trusted adult if someone or something makes them feel uncomfortable or worried, and if someone has asked to meet them in person.

Volunteer Now has lots of information sheets and factsheets on our [publications section](#).

NB Pay particular attention to our [Child Sexual Exploitation](#) and [E-Safety](#) factsheets.

Visit our [safeguarding page](#) and find out about training available.

Other useful websites:

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/>

<https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/>