Sexual Abuse Online

The Marie Collins Foundation

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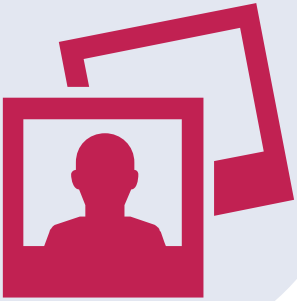
How Can I Help My Child?

In this booklet you will find information about what online harm is and ways you can effectively help and support your children.



Access to phones, social media and the internet means that young people can communicate with others without those caring for them knowing and this can make it difficult when we want to keep them safe.

Online sexual harm is one of the things that you might find most worrying, particularly when your child has more knowledge about this world than you do.

What is online harm?

Simply put, it is any behaviour online that causes harm; this could be physical, emotional or sexual. Online sexual harm includes:

- Sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Grooming – someone befriending a child and building trust so they can sexually harm them.
- Sexting – Sending or receiving messages that are about sex.
- Sending or receiving sexual photos.
- Sextortion – Forcing somebody to do something by threatening to publish sexual images or information about them.
- Children being encouraged to access adult porn sites.

When should I be worried?

Teenagers don't think like we do. We know that the brain is not fully developed until the mid-twenties and the teenage years see the second biggest growth in brain development. This means teenagers are more likely to take risks without thinking of the long-term impact. This makes them more vulnerable to sexual abuse online as they may become involved with somebody without wondering why a person they don't know is talking to them.

The challenge for you is that it isn't always possible to know if your child is safe online, but you are probably in the best place to see a change in behaviour which is often a sign that something isn't right.

Some examples of behaviours that may mean that your child is being harmed online –

- Being secretive/defensive about what they're doing online.
- Have new things, clothes, mobile phone that they can't/won't explain.
- Sexual behaviour that isn't age appropriate and may be harmful.
- Being upset, withdrawn or distressed.
- Spending more or less time online.
- Having access to drugs and/or alcohol.
- Spending more time away from home or going missing.
- Going to unusual places to meet friends.

Remember that every child is different and these behaviours may just be part of their normal teenage development.

If you're worried about any behaviour it is important that you speak to somebody.

Why don't young people tell?

You may think that your child would tell you if something was happening online that they're uncomfortable with. It's extremely common for young people to feel shame when sexually abused and be too frightened to tell anybody.

Abusers may:

- Tell your child to keep it a secret.
- Place blame on them making them think it's their fault.
- Make your child feel special.
- Persuade your child they are doing nothing wrong.
- Ask for sexual images that they can use to threaten your child.
- Force your child into sexually inappropriate activity.
- Convince your child that they won't be believed if they tell.

You may find yourself in a position where you find out your child has been sexually abused online and they may not have told you or may even have denied it when you asked.

Your response, both in what you say and how you act, can affect what happens next.

How should I respond?

Breathe

It can be scary when your child tells you something or you find something out that makes you think they have been harmed online.

You're probably tempted to try to deal with it as quickly as possible but take some time to think.

We've found that these tips will give you the best chance to protect your child from future online sexual harm.

Things to think about

You're not alone. It's OK if you feel you need to talk to somebody and share your worries. This could be family, a friend or a professional such as a teacher or youth worker. If you can't think of anybody, further details of support organisations can be found at the end of this document.

You may be feeling that what has happened is your fault. It's really important you remember that the only person to blame is the offender. Offenders are very clever, often understand how to exploit people online and manipulate people into doing things that they wouldn't normally do.

Don't think your child is to blame - anybody can be groomed and there is no shame in falling for somebody's actions online. Even adults get duped by internet scams and make mistakes online so why should young people be any different?

Before talking about this with your child think about:

- when and where is best – it should be somewhere that you and your child feel comfortable and nobody can hear you. You should make sure you have plenty of time and there are no distractions.
- who your child is most likely to talk to – we know that children don't always want to listen to their parents so you may want to think about asking an adult sibling, an aunt or uncle or a family friend.
- what you will say to start the conversation – it may be better to have a general conversation around internet use before asking more direct questions, particularly if you have discovered something you're worried about.
- there is no right way other than doing what you think works for your child.

DO:

- Take an interest in your child's world online. Be honest when you don't understand and ask them to explain it to you.
- Find resources that help keep your child safe online (see back page).
- Tell your child that they can come and talk to you about anything they're experiencing online. It doesn't matter whether they think they will upset you – the most important thing is that they tell you.
- Notice changes in behaviour and see if they want to talk to you about anything.
- Accept that young people will take risks online. Talk to your child about mistakes that everybody makes, that they are not uncommon, and that it's better to talk to someone even if they think it's too late.
- Be open to what you are being told. If your child tells you something it's really important that they feel listened to, are taken seriously and are reassured that they are not in any trouble and have done the right thing by telling you.
- Be mindful of the words you use. Be clear about what you're worried about and avoid telling your child it's their fault or they should have known better.
- Be honest. If you think that you need to tell someone else then your child needs to know who that is and why.
- Include your child in any discussions with others. It's important that your child feels that they are at the centre of decisions made.
- Seek help, don't think you need to do this alone.

DON'T:

- Assume that your child will tell you. You may need to start the conversation.
- Feel bad for being overwhelmed by the internet and social media. Children are often much more aware of the latest technology but there are lots of resources available to help you to understand (see back page).
- Rely on online safety lessons as this may give a message that it's your child's responsibility to keep themselves safe, and this may prevent them coming to you if they're worried or if something has happened.
- Blame your child for what has happened. They may already be worried about what you're going to say and your reaction will be important in how your child makes sense of what has happened.
- Expect your child to listen to you! You may need support from others to help you.

Getting help from others

If there are concerns that your child has been sexually abused online there are a number of different people who may need to be involved including the police and social services. It is important that everyone works together to help protect your child from any further harm.

It is important to build a picture of your family and your child so that everyone understands the situation from your family's perspective and ensures that the right help and support is offered.

Professionals are there to help you, not to judge, and it's important that we can all work together. They are there to help you and your family to understand what happened and how this may affect you in the future. This may include counselling, advice, practical support if the case goes to court or if you just want somebody to talk to.

You may have a clear idea about what is best for your child and it's important to share this with the people working with your family. Remember that your child might also have clear ideas about this and it's important that they are heard, even if you disagree. We know that good relationships can help reduce future harm online so it's important that the right people are involved in future work with you and your child.

What has happened does not have to define your child forever and they can go on to live a safe and happy life. BUT it is important that they receive the right support to allow this to happen. Remember that this support may need to remain in place for some time. We might not get it right the first time and there may be other concerns along the way. It is best to take one day at a time.

Where can I go to get help?

If your child tells you they have been sexually abused online you should contact the police immediately.

If you are worried about online sexual abuse or the way somebody is communicating online you can contact the following organisations:

Marie Collins Foundation | help@mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

CEOP To report online sexual abuse - www.ceop.police.uk
For further advice - www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents

Childline | 0800 1111 | www.childline.org.uk

NSPCC | 0808 800 5000 | www.nspcc.org.uk

If you are concerned about images shared online you can report these directly to the **Internet Watch Foundation** at www.iwf.org.uk

If you are concerned about your own or somebody else's behaviour online you can access advice and support from the **Lucy Faithfull Foundation** at www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk

More general advice and support is available from the following organisations:

NWG Network | www.nwgnetwork.org

ChildNet | www.childnet.com

The Marie Collins Foundation

For more information please call 01765 688827 or email help@mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk

TheMarieCollinsFoundation
MCFcharityUK
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Charity Nos: 1144355 / SC048777
Company No: 7657115

For information please call 01332 585371 or email network@nwgnetwork.org

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NatWorGroup
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NWG. Tackling Child Exploitation.
Charity No. 1125632,
Company No. 6557851