LEARNING ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE’S RESEARCH SUMMARY

ONLINE SEXUAL HARM
When we talk about **online sexual harm** in this report we mean:

- *Anything sexual that is abusive, or makes someone feel upset or uncomfortable*

It can include:

- *Sexual things that happen online, or*
- *Online contact that leads to face to face sexual harm.*

This can mean different things including: receiving pressuring messages; having to share or view sexual pictures or videos when you don’t want to; or being persuaded to meet up with someone face to face for some kind of sexual activity.
In 2019 we were asked to find out what children and young people think about their school education about online sexual harm.

We were asked to do this research by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (‘The Inquiry’). The Inquiry know that children and young people can be at risk of different types of online sexual harm. They wanted to know how adults can improve children’s education about this, and better protect children and young people from such harm.

Our research project asked children and young people what they think about:

1. Being online
2. The risk of sexual harm happening online
3. The education they get about this topic in school
4. How to improve that education
5. What else can help keep children safe
We spoke to children and young people in different types of schools and projects across England and Wales.

- **213 children and young people aged 10 - 18** answered our survey
- **45 children and young people aged 14 – 16** took part in focus groups, and
- **9 young people aged 13 – 20 who had experienced online sexual harm** took part in interviews (8 were female and 1 was male)
Children and young people took part from all across England and Wales.
Shapes on the map show all the different areas we went to.
WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US
Sometimes I think adults see it [the internet] as something that takes away from life but it can be used for loads of good stuff as well, for education and whatever else.

(male focus group)

Overall the children and young people we spoke to said there were more good things about being online than difficult or upsetting things. They wanted adults to know and understand this.

However they also explained that sometimes the good and bad parts of being online couldn’t be separated. Taking part in the enjoyable bits of being online also meant that they sometimes experienced things that upset or harmed them. Children and young people spoke about the fact that people (both friends and strangers) did and said things online that they were unlikely to say face to face. They also explained how the internet allowed people they hadn’t met to contact them and speak to them in ways that couldn’t happen offline.
Young people told us they particularly enjoyed connecting with friends online. But online social media was also associated with a lot of pressure to be ‘liked’ and gain more followers.

When you first get social media you’re a bit overwhelmed. You’re like ‘oh my gosh, this person is adding me’...It’s your first year at secondary school, that’s where all the pressure really comes in, who’s got the most friends, who’s got the most followers, who can take better pictures, that’s where it all starts really.

(16 year old female)

They also mentioned some positive parts of being online that could help them feel safe:

- feeling able to ask for help more easily
- having ways to control who could speak to you online, through blocking or privacy settings, and
- sharing difficult experiences with others online.
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)
Most children and young people understood something about online sexual harm but also showed us a need and interest for more information about:

- the types of online sexual harm
- why it happens
- how to identify it
- how it can affect children and young people, and
- what to do if it happens.

There was a particular need for more information about the types of online sexual harm that they could experience from friends or other people they know.

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

(15 year old female)
The type of online sexual harm children and young people most often mentioned was pressure to share nude or sexual images. This could also involve receiving sexual pictures that they didn’t ask for or want. These requests and images came from both people that young people knew and those they didn’t. Sometimes they had threatening messages with them.

_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_ (14 year old female)

Some of the young women who met us explained that this type of thing happened so often that they stopped recognising that it was harmful, and it became part of their ‘normality’.
Children and young people explained that boys and girls get different types of unfair and unhelpful messages about online sexual harm.

For girls this includes messages that if they don’t share nude pictures of themselves they’re ‘uptight’ and if they do they’re to blame.

*It’s a pressure thing. For most girls.. there’s two ways. It will either be, ‘You’ve done that [sent a nude image], I can’t believe you’ve done that’, or they’ll be like, ‘Why don’t you do that, you’re frigid’, if you don’t do it.*

(15 year old female)

For boys this might be messages that these things don’t happen to boys, or telling them they should be able to ignore it or cope with it.

*Boys are often told to laugh it off as well, which I don’t think is fair. It’s like they’re often told just to make it a joke.*

(female focus group)
We know that it is not children and young people’s responsibility to keep themselves safe online. However our research found that many children and young people think it is mostly, or entirely, up to them to keep themselves safe when spending time online.

This means they may:

- blame themselves if they experience sexual harm online, and
- be less likely to ask for help after something happens.

It is really important for education to help children and young people understand that experiencing online sexual harm is never their fault.
Children and young people told us they wanted more support from adults and professionals to help them avoid and deal with online sexual harm. They said they needed:

- more support to recognise, avoid, and respond to potential risks
- more action to reduce the pressures and risks children and young people face online
- more understanding of their online lives amongst adults, and more relevant messaging and responses.
How schools should teach about online sexual harm
Children and young people agreed that school was a place where everyone should have a chance to learn about online sexual harm. School was the place where most children and young people we spoke to had learnt about online sexual harm. Other places they learnt from were parents, friends, and the media. About 1 in 10 of the children who took part in our survey told us they’d learnt from personal experience.

**WHEN SHOULD SCHOOLS START TEACHING ABOUT ONLINE SEXUAL HARM?**

Children and young people said that it is important that this happens before they start using social media or spending time online independently. This means talking about these things in primary school.

I think they could have done it a tiny bit earlier because I was already on my phone in year 6 and I was already getting messages from random people and I didn’t know what to do.

(14 year old female)
For the young people we spoke to who had experienced online sexual harm, education had usually come too late or not been detailed enough.

There’s no point in learning about a situation after the situation has actually god damned happened (14 year old male)

Children and young people also explained that education about online sexual harm needs to be done regularly (not just a one off event)

AND they said it needs to be linked with other topics and subject areas like: consent, wellbeing, and sex and relationships.
WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN ABOUT

- The realities of children and young people’s online experiences
- ALL types of online sexual harm (not just ‘stranger danger’)
- The impact of online sexual harm and how to get support
- How to understand if something is harmful or abusive – particularly when it happens between friends or in a relationship
- The importance of not harming other people online
- Dealing with the wider pressures of being online – e.g. pressure to be liked or to be popular and how this might link to online sexual harm
- How to report something that concerns them
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.”
(female focus group)

I’d rather [children or young people] speak up about it instead of suffer in silence, because the reason why I suffered in silence was because I thought I was going to get in trouble for it.
(16 year old female)
HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO LEARN

- Through education which reflects their lived experiences
- Through two-way conversations (not just being talked at)
- By having a chance to input and influence lesson plans
- Having their own expertise and experiences listened to
- In lessons which present risk proportionally (acknowledging the positive and negative impacts of being online)
- Through different types of resources and different types of teachers (including external ‘experts’ and people with lived experience of these issues)
- In lessons that feel make them feel safe – and where they feel they can ask difficult questions
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

(16 year old female)
Children and young people were clear that it’s not just schools’ and teachers’ responsibilities to keep them safe from online sexual harm. They thought other people had an important role to play. These included:

**Parents:** children and young people told us they wanted parents and carers to speak more openly to them about the risks of online sexual harm. However they recognised that parents might need help to do this.

I think as well as teaching young people about online safety they should actually teach adults [and] parents, because then they can warn their own children about it... 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)
The ‘online industry’: children and young people told us that companies which make the apps, platforms and websites that they use should work harder to help keep them safe. Their ideas for how they could do this included:

- *Inserting advice and warnings for users to read when signing up*
- *Improving how age restrictions work and are checked*
- *Improving online privacy settings – including the use of default privacy settings when setting up an account*
- *Improved moderation (checking) and more accessible reporting options, and stronger action when concerns are reported.*

*I think they [online companies] have a major responsibility, and they don’t do it, they don’t think about it at all.*

(15 year old female)
Society: children and young people told us that keeping children safe from online sexual harm is a job for wider society and the media. They felt that action needs to be taken to tackle:

- harmful ‘gender norms’, and the way sexual violence can be normalised by culture, media and society, and
- the overly powerful influence of media and ‘celebrity culture’ including an online ‘approval culture’ they linked to this.
1. Children and young people have lots of suggestions as to how schools can better talk about online sexual harm with pupils. It is really important that we listen to children and young people if we want to keep them safe online.

2. Exposure to online sexual harm is relatively common among children and young people. Before spending unsupervised time online children need access to education which addresses this and helps them access support if it occurs.

3. Overall children and young people value and enjoy spending time online and need their education to recognise this. Too many negative messages about being online are not helpful.

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

5. Children and young people are never responsible for preventing online sexual harm and educational messages need to be clear about this.

6. Preventing and responding to online sexual harm is everyone’s business.
If you have been affected by anything in this report and want to speak to someone you can call ChildLine for free on 0800 1111 or speak to an online counsellor at www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat/

If you would like more information about online safety go to www.thinkuknow.co.uk

If you are worried about online sexual harm or the way someone has been communicating with you online you can make a report to one of CEOP’s Child Protection Advisors. Go to: www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre

If you’d like to read the main report that this leaflet is based on visit: www.iicsa.org.uk/document/learning-about-online-sexual-harm-executive-summary
We are hugely thankful to all the children and young people who took part in this project. We hope what we learnt will help policy makers, schools, and other professionals improve education and support for other children and young people.

To help us with this project we worked with three Young Researcher Advisory Panel (YRAP) members. They helped design our interviews and survey and gave feedback on the findings. We are very grateful to them for their contribution to this project.