

Children sending and receiving sexual messages

The NSPCC and LGfL DigiSafe¹ recently conducted the largest ever UK survey of children's experiences online. We received almost 40,000 responses from children aged 7-16, who shared their experiences and understandings of the risks they face online. Our first snapshot, exploring the findings of this survey, focuses on children's experiences of online grooming, especially their experiences of receiving and sending sexual messages.

Key Messages

- Of the **primary school children surveyed, 1 in 25 had been sent or shown a naked or semi-naked image by an adult.** Of the secondary school children surveyed, 1 in every 20 had been sent or shown a naked or semi-naked image by an adult.
- Of the **primary school children surveyed, 1 in 20 had been sent a naked or semi-naked image by another young person.** Of the secondary school children surveyed, 1 in 8 had been sent or shown a naked or semi-naked image by another young person.
- The NSPCC is concerned about the scale and impact of children sharing intimate images of themselves online, which is why **we are calling for robust regulation of social networking sites to tackle the production of child sexual abuse imagery at source.**

Introduction

The nature of child abuse imagery on the internet is changing. Recent analyses of child abuse material on the internet indicates that a third of is now self-generated, with the majority of images being taken in the home, most often in a

child's own bedroom.² Grooming, blackmail, and coercion are often used by adults (as well as other young people) to elicit sexual images or videos; and once a child has shared an image or video, it is unlikely they will be able to regain control of it. Indeed, all too often, those images are sought by groomers that share these images in online spaces that specialise in trading, swapping, and selling indecent images of children. Every time this image is viewed, shared, or downloaded, the child in those images is being re-abused, with their abusers potentially spread across all corners of the globe.

This snapshot considers the scale of children sending and receiving intimate images online and proposes robust regulation for social networking sites. The survey was conducted between February and March 2018. We asked children to tell us about their experiences of going online and almost 40,000 children aged between 7 and 16 shared their stories with us. Surveys were completed by children at school as part of their school day. A high proportion of children were from the South East of England (25,987) but the whole of the UK was represented: England (exc. South East) 10,957; Scotland 2,365; Wales 435; and, Northern Ireland 83.

¹ LGfL DigiSafe, the online safety & safeguarding arm of the London Grid for Learning

² Internet Watch Foundation 2017 Annual Report, April 2018, <https://annualreport.iwf.org.uk/> accessed 10/08/18.

The scale of sexual grooming online

The NSPCC defines online sexual grooming as a preparatory stage of sexual abuse. Grooming occurs when a known or unknown adult, or member of their peer group, uses online technology to communicate with a child or young person with the intention of encouraging or manipulating them to engage in sexual behaviour. Online sexual exploitation can be the result of online grooming. From an innocuous starting point, the groomer will often manipulate the conversation to become increasingly sexualised, and this is generally used as a way of de-sensitising a child before the abuse begins. In this survey we asked children and young people about whether they had received a naked or semi-naked image because this can be an indication that grooming has taken place.

Our survey findings illustrate the scale of grooming behaviour children and young people are exposed to online. Of the primary school aged children that participated in our survey, 1 in 25 had received a naked or semi-naked picture from an adult. This rose to 1 in 20 children of secondary school age. These findings confirm existing research, which found that social networks are used by groomers to target children at scale with the intention of then migrating them onto encrypted or live-streaming sites, where children may feel less inhibited.³ Live streaming sites are often used because moderation policies, as well as community guidelines, are more difficult to enforce. One young girl (aged 9-10)

told us about her experience of being asked for nude images while she was playing online games.

*When a complete stranger asked me to take my clothes off and send him a picture... When i deleted the game, i went on another site and the same person asked me to have s*x with him, i told him to "back off" and then deleted that game. i have seen this person on many sites that i play, and i decided to just block him.*

Almost 40,000 children participated in our research and shared their stories about online grooming, some as young as 7 years old. The rate at which children are targeted, and children's own descriptions, offer a troubling reflection of children's experiences online; where they become accustomed to being contacted on apps, sites, and games by adults seeking to groom and exploit them. We cannot continue to ask children to learn to deal with this type of abuse when industry is able take simple steps to prevent children from being approached by those seeking to groom them.

Children's responses to grooming

Children described a variety of responses to being approached for sexual or naked images. Some of the young people who participated in the survey describe actively using the platform's blocking and reporting features:

i think he was over 18, but a man asked me to swap picks and i instantly said no and blocked and reported him. i dont know what happened to him though (Girl, aged 12-13)

Have you ever been sent any of the following messages?

Stage	A naked or semi-naked picture/video from a young person.	A naked or semi-naked picture/video from an adult	A sexual message from a young person	A sexual messages from an adult
Primary	5%	4%		
Secondary	13%	5%	13%	5%

³ Annual Strategic Threat Assessment: Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, National Crime Agency (August 2016) p.11.

Have you ever sent any of the following messages?

Stage	A naked or semi-naked picture/video to a young person	A naked or semi-naked picture/video to an adult	Sexual messages to a young person	Sexual messages to an adult
Primary	3%	2%		
Secondary	4%	2%	4%	2%

A number of the children that we spoke to told us about how they use the safety features available on the platform to report the incident, or that they talked to a trusted adult, which is a positive reflection of the education young people receive about how to keep themselves safe online. However, our recent Net Aware survey has highlighted that, although children know what steps they need to take to keep themselves safe online, it is not preventing them from being exposed to inappropriate content or behaviour, such as grooming.

One of the young people who participated in our research told us that one of the worst things that she had experienced online was when:

a girl from my primary [was] sending half naked pictures because its what "everyone does" (Girl, aged 12-13)

Although some young people describe reporting offending accounts to the social network or telling their parents about upsetting experiences that they were having online, a significant proportion of the young people that we surveyed also agreed to requests to send naked or semi-naked images of themselves to an adult.

2% of the primary school-aged children surveyed had sent a naked or semi-naked image to an adult. The same proportion (2%) of secondary-aged children had also sent a naked or a semi-naked image to an adult.⁴

Half the number of primary school children that had received a naked image from an adult had sent naked or semi-naked image or video of themselves; 1 in 50 children of primary school age had sent such an image to an adult.

It is important to note that in cases where an adult is sending sexual images to a child this may be a stranger who is seeking to groom the child. However, adults known to the child will also often exploit children's use of technology to facilitate the grooming process, through contacting them online. One young person told us that one of the worst things that had happened to them online was when:

my coach sent me a video of santa stripping naked (Boy, aged 14-15)

Sharing and receiving messages from peers

There was once a picture of a girl who got drugged during a party and her pictures were spread all over social media and she was teased and bullied for what happened to her while she was drugged. (Girl, aged 14-15)

The NSPCC's definition of grooming, as noted above, includes young people's intimate relationships where coercion and control are used to manipulate or force sexual behaviour. Existing research focusing on secondary school-aged children has demonstrated that a high rate of children and young people who have shared images of themselves felt coerced into doing so, or had done so as a way of postponing physically sexual behaviour.⁵ Feeling that peers are routinely sharing intimate images with others has also been regularly cited by children as a reason for their deciding to do so as well.⁶

⁴ Although the rates of children being sent naked or semi-naked images by adults is higher for secondary-aged children than for primary-aged children, it is striking that there is not a greater difference; it is possible that this may be a result of different developmental understanding the implied meaning behind the questions being asked.

⁵ *Young People's Experiences of Online Sexual Harassment: A cross country report from Project DeShame* (December 2017), p.33.

⁶ *Young People's Experiences of Online Sexual Harassment: A cross country report from Project DeShame* (December 2017), p.27.

Our findings indicate that sharing of naked and semi-naked images is also occurring between children at primary school, which may indicate that we should widen the conversation about sharing intimate images to include children in primary school, who may have previously been considered too young to be at risk. 5% of the primary school aged children that participated in our survey told us that they had received a naked or semi-naked image from another young person. Furthermore, 3% of primary school children told us that they had also sent a naked or semi-naked image to another young person. A further risk is illustrated by the fact that these numbers may also include cases where an adult pretends to be another young person to coerce or manipulate a child into sharing a naked image of themselves.

A stranger on snapchat added me and I thought it was my friends sister but it was not it was a complete stranger asking me where I live [and to] send a picture of my face to them (Boy, aged 9-10)

Conclusion

This snapshot has explored the experience of children sending and receiving intimate images and, through it, experiences of grooming. Not all the cases discussed here will be a result of grooming but, in many instances, it will be an underlying factor.⁷ In the first year of sexual communication with a child being made illegal, the police recorded over 3,000 cases in England and Wales, the equivalent of almost 9 cases a day – and yet the National Crime Agency states that this only represents the ‘tip of the iceberg’ when it comes to the true scale of online grooming occurring online.⁸ At the same time, analysis by the Internet Watch Foundation of child sexual abuse images found online indicated that almost 1/3 of the material was self-generated. Given the rates of sharing and receiving of intimate images by children, including children still in primary school, demonstrated by this report, it is clear that action needs to be taken to prevent the spread of these illegal images.

⁷ It can be very difficult for children to recognise whether they are being, as the grooming process is predicated on developing a trusting relationship where the child believes that the groomer is their boyfriend or girlfriend. Therefore, rates of self-identified grooming by young people tend to be very low.

⁸ *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2018*, National Crime Agency (2018), p.26.

Policy recommendations

It is possible, however, to prevent these images from being produced in the first place, by intervening in the grooming process before any new images of abuse are created. Despite having the technology readily at their disposal, platforms have routinely failed to take the most basic steps to tackle grooming and prevent the production of child abuse images. For instance, through the introduction of technology that could help to proactively identify grooming patterns and stem this flow of imagery online.

The internet opens up a world of possibilities for children of all ages and every child should have the opportunity to learn, explore and play online safely. However, as demonstrated by this snapshot, children also face significant risks when exploring their online worlds. That is why the NSPCC is calling for the government to introduce an independent regulator that ensures that social networking sites follow a series of basic rules about how they respond to child safeguarding complaints. At a minimum, we are calling for:

- **Statutory regulation of social networking sites**, with platforms being required to adopt a set of minimum safeguarding standards;
- The **regulator must be able to hold non-complaint sites to account**, with appropriate powers to investigate platforms; impose regulatory conditions on companies; and issue financial penalties to sites that fail to take proportionate measures to keep children safe;
- Platforms should face a regulatory requirement to adopt **technology that will allow them to proactively detect grooming** on their sites.

For too long, social networking sites have been able to decide how, or if, they want to take steps to keep children safe, and after years of inaction by social networking sites, we face the immense task of ensuring that child safeguarding is integrated into the design of their platforms. It is time for the tech firms to be finally held accountable for the risks on their sites.