



Online Sexual Harassment

The role and importance of parents and carers

Advice for educators based on research findings from

PROJECT
deSHAME II



This short paper shares our learning about the role and importance of parents and carers in tackling and responding to online sexual harassment among children.

Project deSHAME is a European project run by partners Childnet International (UK), Kék Vonal (Hungary), Red Barnet (Denmark) and UCLan (UK). It developed from an increasing awareness that young people were witnessing and experiencing harmful sexual behaviours from their peers online.

Project deSHAME 1 focused on online sexual harassment among 13-17 year olds providing resources and support for educators, school leadership and police.

Project deSHAME 2 focused on online sexualised bullying providing resources and support for 9-12 year olds, educators, parents and carers.



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Introduction

We found that 9% of 13-17 year olds had received sexual threats online (including rape threats) from people their age in the last year, 29% had witnessed this behaviour, and 25% had rumours shared online about their sexual behaviour.

These are some forms of online sexual harassment (OSH) experienced by young people. OSH is defined by Project deSHAME as unwanted sexual behaviour which occurs on any digital platform using sexualised images, videos, messages and comments.

The project identified four sub-categories: Non-consensual sharing of sexual images and videos or 'sexting'; exploitation, coercion and receiving sexual threats; sexualised bullying by targeting or exclusion from a group with the use of sexual content that humiliates or upsets; and unwanted sexualisation through the receipt of unwelcome sexual requests, comments or content.

These behaviours take place in a peer-to-peer context and occurs in front of an active, engaged online audience. It can make the person targeted feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against.

Our research also asked young people what they would do if they experienced this behaviour. 48% of teens said they would speak to parents/carers and only 14% would speak to a teacher. When we asked about barriers to seeking help, 42% said they would be worried about what would happen next and 39% would worry that they were to blame. In the project focus groups, young people also told us they were concerned about how their parents and educators would react if they were targeted and sought help.

These results clearly identify a gap in internet safety education and resources relating to OSH, and the need for specific strategies to address it among young people. It is also a subject which presents many barriers to young people in feeling able to talk about their experiences and seek help. One of these is a lack of understanding of OSH among educators and parents/carers.

Top #5 barriers to seeking help:



Rationale

Project deSHAME 1 focused on teens and informed the development of a set of educational resources - the Step Up Speak Up toolkit - for schools and young people which addressed this behaviour. However, it was clear from the focus groups, the Youth Advisory Boards and the educators we engaged with, that younger children (aged 9-12) also witnessed and experienced OSH. This generally involves bullying and jokes about appearance and body changes for this age group, with the behaviour being more directly sexual for those who are older (e.g., sexual comments, slut shaming and non-consensual sharing of sexual images). As a result, the project uses the term online sexualised bullying to refer to the behaviours which are common for this younger age group as this is better understood by adults within an age-appropriate context. We have used the wider term of OSH for teens which also incorporates the sexualised bullying behaviours experienced by younger children. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout this report.

'I know that children [aged 8 or 9] that I've looked after have had comments about their bodies. Not in a sexual way, but that is in a kind of negative way about how somebody looks...'

(Parent, UK)

Our research highlighted the need to address OSH at an earlier stage, in an age-appropriate way, and we identified a gap in educational resources for young people in this age group, as well as parents/carers. It is also important to encourage a collaborative dialogue between schools and parents/carers which recognises that it is not possible to make clear distinctions between these environments given the centrality of social media in young peoples' lives. This was the rationale for Project deSHAME 2. As part of this, we undertook research to establish an evidence base for the development of resources addressing OSH for these two audiences. The aim of the parent/carer resources was to raise awareness about this issue and to increase confidence in talking to their children about OSH within the wider context of cyberbullying and internet safety. They also focus on encouraging parents/carers to be interested in, and talk to their children about, their online lives more generally in an age-appropriate way.

'I know that children [aged 8 or 9] that I've looked after have had comments about their bodies. Not in a sexual way, but that is in a kind of negative way about how somebody looks...'

(Parent, UK)

60%

of 8-12s say they are more careful about what they share online because of people being mean to each other based on who they are. (UKSIC 2020)

"They could have sent pictures all round the school, adding things on to it too."

Girl, 9-11, UK

Methodology

The project utilised quantitative and qualitative research methods with young people, educators and parents in each country to develop an evidence base for the development of educational resources for these audiences. Data collection involved:



deSHAME 1 deSHAME 2

Ethics and safeguarding

Ethical approval for all forms of data collection was obtained through the University of Central Lancashire in accordance with the requirements of the British Psychological Society (BPS). Adult participants were provided with a full description of key ethical issues and provided consent to take part.

Careful consideration was given to the protection and safeguarding of the young people taking part in the focus groups. Parental consent was obtained, and all key safeguarding issues were discussed with schools in advance. The interview schedules used paid careful attention to the wording of questions, scenarios and language used to ensure that they were age appropriate.

The perspectives of children aged 9-12

A key focus of the project was to talk to young people about their views and experiences of OSH, as well as cyberbullying and their online lives more generally. It was also important to involve them in the development of the project resources. The Youth Advisory Boards and focus group participants provided important insights into this issue. It was clear that young people were concerned about OSH and wanted to be able to talk to their parents/carers about it. They also wanted to feel confident that support is available if they experience a problem or are worried. However, participants were also clear that there were barriers in talking to them. The YAB members in the UK and Denmark highlighted that parents should be honest, offer reassurance, empathise, educate themselves and be available. They also made many suggestions for what parents should not do. They emphasised the importance of not being judgemental or overreacting, being emotional and angry, blaming the child and the need to respect their privacy. This was consistent with what the young people in the focus groups said in relation to what they wanted from adults in terms of support. They also told us that trust was important when talking to parents/carers and educators about online problems or asking for help:

'We need our parents, and a teacher who we really trust.'
(Hungary, Girl aged 9-10)

It was also important for young people to feel that parents/carers will listen to them, ask questions about their online lives and be supportive, regardless of their own online behaviour:

'It is important that the parent is on our side, even if we send that photo. So that your mom or dad or your family is supporting you even in this situation.'
(Hungary, Girl aged 11-12)

However, some young people worried that talking to educators and parents might make the situation worse, that they might overreact or be judgemental about their online behaviour:

'My mum would go psycho if she knew anything. She would just scream at me... I wouldn't be allowed to be in no more group chats... I don't want that to happen...'
(UK Girl, aged 11)

These issues were viewed as important barriers to seeking help. A key focus for the resources for young people is to challenge the perception that adults will react in these ways and reassure them that this will not happen if they seek help for problems. This was also emphasised in the educational resources for parents/carers which encourage them to have the skills and confidence to be supportive, regardless of their child's behaviour. The importance of parents/carers listening to their children and asking about their online lives was also emphasised in the materials given that young people told us how important this is.

The results from the focus groups with young people and the YABs in the different countries highlighted the importance of parents/carers and educators in helping children of this age to navigate their online lives, particularly in relation to OSH. This provided important direction in designing the focus groups and questionnaire for parents/carers, and also in the approach to take for the parental resources developed by the project.

Educator perspectives

Educators told us that some of their colleagues and many parents/carers do not feel that OSH is an issue that affects their children, particularly those who are younger.

In fact, the results of Project deSHAME 1 and the focus groups with children demonstrate that it is important to ensure that parents/carers and educators understand the behaviours which constitute OSH at different ages. This can help them to understand that OSH occurs for younger children, despite differences in the types of behaviours involved, and to develop the confidence to discuss the issue.

Educators acknowledged the wider challenges of engaging and educating parents about online safety. They recognised that talking about OSH in an age-appropriate way has additional challenges because it touches on issues of body image, sexual development and sexual relationships.

They also discussed the need for greater integration of discussions about OSH across school and home contexts as young peoples' digital lives are not clearly distinguished between these environments.

'There's an important part to play in the space between parents and educators when it comes to these issues... Because students' online lives are in fact a grey area between school and their free time... It's the parents we have to work with here...'
(Teacher, Denmark)

This highlights the need for collaboration between educators and parent/carers to support a continuous dialogue with young people which builds their confidence that adults understand their online lives and will support them if they are experiencing problems. The resources developed by project deSHAME for educators and parents/carers aim to encourage this shared responsibility and increase confidence.

'It's more about educating the parents isn't it? And saying this is a thing that could happen and I think just them realising that, because it might not occur to them at all, that sort of thing can happen...'
Parent, UK

1 in 10

of 8-12s say they have felt out of control of the information that is up about them online. (UKSIC 2020)

"You might feel surprised and shocked because I don't know who would send a photo like that. It's just really inappropriate."
Boy, 9-11, UK

Parent/carer perspectives

The results of the qualitative and quantitative research undertaken with parents/carers highlighted a number of key issues which were addressed in the development of the resources for this audience.

Understanding of OSH

The parents/carers who took part in the focus groups across the three countries varied in their understanding of the nature of OSH, but most felt that they needed to have a deeper understanding of the behaviours involved. The main behaviours discussed related to the content of sexual images and their wider sharing within peer networks. The broader set of behaviours which constitute OSH were less frequently discussed (e.g., sexual comments and messages, name-calling). Participants had a general understanding of the potential impacts of online problems more broadly and in relation to the sharing of images. However, they were less aware that other behaviours could be equally as hurtful to young people. In relation to responding to online problems more generally, they were clear that they would speak to the school, the parents of the other children involved and contact social media platforms.

Challenges in talking to children

Parents/carers also discussed the specific challenges related to talking to their children about OSH because of the sensitivity of the issues involved:

'It's difficult to know how to have those discussions with kids, whether they are your own children or your students, because it's not an easy topic to approach...'

Parent, UK

Others particularly highlighted the difficulties of starting conversations about OSH and said that they would value having advice around ways to start these discussions:

'It would be better if you had something you could use, a common starting point for conversation...'

Parent, Denmark

Some parents/carers recognised the need to talk to their children about the issue and not to be judgemental. This focused on building trust and encouraging dialogue:

'And I'm very careful not to be too judgemental....so she won't stop coming to me with things. I'm trying to build a sense of trust in her through the way we talk...'

Parent, Denmark

Others did not think that it was appropriate to discuss this issue with younger children because they were concerned that the behaviours which constitute OSH are not age-appropriate. This reflects the understanding of many parents that OSH specifically relates to sexting and other explicitly sexual behaviours. However, OSH is more focused on comments about appearance and sexual development for younger children and can be discussed in an age-appropriate way. This was a key focus for the educational resources for this audience.

However, other participants felt that age-appropriate discussions about OSH should be started at this younger age to develop young peoples' knowledge in advance of the changing dynamics of OSH as they get older:

'For a lot of children, 12-13 is already too late. It can be damaging if this has happened to them or been said to them and they haven't been empowered with that knowledge...'

Parent, UK)

Overall, the focus groups suggested that parents/carers are willing to learn about OSH, but they are concerned about talking to their children about it, particularly at a younger age, due to the sensitivity of the topic. Developing resources which increase their understanding of the specific behaviours which constitute OSH in this age group and provide conversation starters are important ways of building confidence to talk to their children about this issue.

About the online questionnaire

The online questionnaire for parents/carers examined their understanding, concerns and actions in relation to OSH and internet safety more generally. Our sample were active users of social media in all three countries. They were also older in Denmark and the UK, and younger in Hungary. These characteristics and their potential influence on responding should be recognised in relation to the results presented below.

Parental mediation & discussion of life issues

Most parents/carers felt they had a good understanding of online risks and online safety actions (84%), with 62% frequently talking to their child about staying safe online. However, there were differences in how often parents/carers discussed life issues related to online safety with them. For example, a large proportion frequently talked to their child about friendships (64%) and emotional well-being (60%). Discussion of appropriate sexual/relationship behaviour (30%) and sexual development (28%) was less frequent, although the parents/carers of older girls (13-17) were more likely to have discussed these issues than those of younger girls or boys. Parents/carers need to be encouraged and develop confidence to talk about these issues as they directly relate to OSH. The parental resources emphasise that this behaviour is witnessed and experienced by young people and should be considered as part of wider online safety discussions.

Parental safety concerns and reporting actions

Parents/carers were very concerned about online risks/issues, particularly their child keeping something worrying that happened to them online to themselves (80%), exposure to pornography and other inappropriate content (80%), adult grooming/sexual exploitation (74%) and online sexual bullying (70%). The results also showed that participants were willing to take action if they became aware that their child experienced OSH, with talking to school and reporting to social media platforms being most common (80% for both). This suggests that parents/carers are concerned about OSH and will take action in response to problems. However, they may not be aware of how frequently it occurs online and the different forms that it takes.

'[There is] a massive gap in how to talk about all of this with their children. But in all fairness, most parents have a strong wish to be more involved and supportive. But at the same time have difficulty in understanding the issue...'
Denmark, Red Barnet senior advisor

Witnessing behaviour

This was apparent in the qualitative and quantitative data which showed that there is a knowledge gap between parents/carers and children in how frequently young people witness OSH. Many parents do not think that their children have seen such behaviour online, but the research undertaken for deSHAME 1 found that many young people have witnessed it. Parents thought that the most common OSH behaviour was non-consensual image sharing and pressure to send nude images. However, the YAB and quantitative data from deSHAME 1 indicated that rumours and gossip about sexual behaviour were most frequently experienced and witnessed by young people. This highlights the importance of increasing parental understanding about what actually happens and is witnessed by young people online to address this knowledge gap and facilitate more effective discussions about OSH. This is addressed in the parental education resources developed by the project.

Conclusions/recommendations

The research results reported here highlight the importance of addressing OSH in the lives of young people. It is an issue that affects them across childhood and adolescence, and it can have significant impacts on their well-being. The identified barriers for young people to come forward and talk about OSH are a key challenge in preventing and responding to OSH. This emphasises the importance of parents/carers and educators taking a non-judgemental, supportive approach when addressing this issue.

Giving young people a voice in discussions about how best to protect them from OSH is a central focus of the project and one of its strengths. The Youth Advisory Board and the focus groups have provided invaluable insight into how young people experience this issue, the help that they would like from adults, and the approaches that they would find most useful. Involving them as stakeholders and co-creators of educational resources is an important way for all other actors to ensure that their work is consistent with the changing contexts of young peoples' online experiences and needs.

Taking action in relation to OSH is a shared responsibility and parents/carers have a central role to play, both in terms of dialogue with young people about their online lives, and also in giving them the confidence to seek support when it is needed.

The teaching toolkit for schools and the parent/carer resources developed by the project provide a variety of different materials which can help these groups to engage with young people about this issue.

Key recommendations

- **Evidence-based:** Educational resources and activities for young people, schools and parents/carers need to be evidence-based.
- **Co-created:** Young people (as well as educators and parents/carers) should be involved in the development of educational resources as co-creators. Young peoples' existing knowledge and strategies for supporting peers experiencing OSH should be recognised and incorporated.
- **Accessible:** Resources need to be easy to use and contain age-appropriate information about OSH. Guidelines for educators and parents/carers should clarify the behaviours which constitute OSH at different ages and strategies for age-appropriate preventive dialogue.
- **Inclusive:** Resources should allow all young people to feel represented and respected.
- **Collaborative:** Ongoing dialogue is required with young people, schools and parents/carers to inform current and future resources, campaigns and projects on this topic given how rapidly online behaviour changes. Greater collaboration and integration of educational efforts is required between schools and parents/carers.
- **Contextual:** Emphasise the wider perspective of preventative dialogue as part of sex, relationships and health education.
- **Continuous:** Ongoing dialogue and parental interest in the general online lives of young people is central to prevent and mitigate OSH.



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