

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: online abuse

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC helpline contacts to highlight the impact of online abuse on children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic.

September 2020

Key findings

Childline counselling sessions

- Since the stay-at-home guidance was issued, Childline has seen a 11 per cent increase in the number of counselling sessions about online sexual abuse, from an average of 207 sessions per month before lockdown to an average of 230 sessions per month since lockdown began¹.
- Childline heard from some children and young people who had been groomed online. Techniques used by perpetrators include: using multiple channels to communicate with children; moving conversations from one platform to another; and taking conversations from public to private online spaces.
- Some children and young people talked to Childline about feeling lonely during the pandemic and seeking company and support online from people they have never met face-to-face. Sometimes these people used this as an opportunity to target children for sexual abuse.

¹ For the purpose of these briefings, we have compared the period before the government issued its stay-at-home guidance (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (1 April to 31 August). See the methodology section for more details.

- Some children talked to Childline about using online platforms for the first time during the pandemic, to communicate with friends they already knew. In some cases, they were targeted by perpetrators of sexual abuse.
- Childline heard from children and young people who were experiencing distressing memories of non-recent online sexual abuse. For some, this was the first time they had been able to recognise that what had happened to them was abuse.
- For some children and young people, experiencing online sexual abuse can leave them frightened about using online platforms. This can give them extra challenges during the pandemic, when a lot of communication is taking place online.

NSPCC helpline contacts

- The NSPCC helpline saw a 60 per cent increase in contacts from people with concerns about children experiencing online sexual abuse, from an average of 117 per month before lockdown to an average of 187 per month since lockdown.
- Some parents and carers recognised that the internet had an important role in their child's life, especially during the pandemic, and wanted advice about how to keep the child safe without losing the benefits of the online world.
- Some parents and carers felt their child was struggling to understand online risks and/or that the child didn't understand they were being sexually abused online.
- Some parents and carers described sophisticated systems that perpetrators use to sexually exploit children online and keep in frequent contact.

About this briefing

This briefing contains quotes from children and young people which may cause distress. Further support is available from the NSPCC helpline and Childline (contact details are listed at the end of the briefing).

Online abuse is any type of abuse that is facilitated by the internet. It can happen anywhere that allows online communication, including social networks, text messages and messaging apps, email and private messaging, online chats, comments on live streaming sites and voice or video chat in games. Perpetrators may also share abusive images, live streams and recordings with others online (this can happen whether the original abuse occurred online or offline).

Children and young people may experience different types of abuse online, including bullying, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. This briefing focuses on the concerns being raised by children, young people and adults to Childline and the NSPCC helpline about children being targeted for sexual abuse online.

Like all types of abuse, online sexual abuse can be difficult to identify and hard to talk about. This briefing highlights some increases in the number of people talking to us about specific issues, but the statistics in this briefing should not be read as an indicator of prevalence.

➤ [Find out more about online abuse on NSPCC Learning](#)

Recognising online sexual abuse

Spending time online is a normal part of life for children and young people and it can bring lots of benefits. But the online world also gives perpetrators a way to access and sexually abuse children, for example by using the design features of online platforms to contact large numbers of children at the same time. This means it can be difficult for children and the adults in their lives to spot if abuse is happening.

Some contacts to the NSPCC helpline were from parents and carers who had noticed a worrying change in their child's behaviour. This included the child using sexualised and developmentally inappropriate language, or talking about inappropriate topics online. Some parents and carers noticed secretive behaviour, such as children hiding their screens, urgently switching off or closing screens, deleting messages and/or never leaving their phone unattended.

"My daughter and I used to have a very healthy and open relationship; she would normally come to me for anything. However, since the coronavirus she's not been her usual self; she seems very low and quiet around me lately. I've also noticed her becoming very protective of her laptop – she refused to show me what she was doing on there and got very angry when I asked to borrow it. I'm worried she might be in some kind of danger."

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Other parents and carers noticed their child had become more withdrawn, was having mood swings or struggling with their mental health. Some were worried that their child was self-harming.

"My 15-year-old daughter has been talking online to a 21-year-old male through her PlayStation. I have no proof they are in a sexual relationship but she has been self-harming and has become very

withdrawn. She has sneaked out during lockdown to meet him and I am very worried about their relationship given the age gap.”

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Some people had become concerned that their child was spending more time than usual online and were worried about the possible reasons for this. They decided to look at the child’s phone or social media accounts and found abusive messages.

“I have noticed my 12-year-old daughter has been constantly playing an online game called Rec Room. We decided to check her computer and found sexualised messages and images which were sent between my child and two unknown adults (possibly one male and one female). The messages were disgusting and made me feel physically sick as I could not believe my child could think of having these sexualised conversations. The unknown adults persuaded my child to visit pornographic sites and then message them about what she had seen. They have also sent sexually explicit cartoons and images to my daughter.”

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Some parents and carers contacted our helpline to ask for guidance on talking to their children about online safety. They felt their child was struggling to understand the dangers of using online platforms and wanted help to balance the risks and benefits.

“I am worried about my son who has been using Fortnite and talking to someone he doesn’t know via chat. We have gone online and asked the person to identify themselves but they abruptly ended the chat. I have tried to explain online grooming to my son but he doesn’t seem to understand the severity of what I am saying. We don’t want to remove it from him because he is home all the time because of lockdown and has nothing else to do. How can I make him understand the dangers?”

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Some children and young people contacted Childline because they had experienced online sexual abuse in the past, but hadn’t recognised it at the time. During the pandemic, upsetting memories had resurfaced and they needed support to process what had happened.

“I met a guy online when I was 12 or 13, and he said he was 17 (I suspect he was a lot older). We had a sort of online relationship and because I was so young I didn’t understand the things he was asking me to do were unusual – I realise now I was being groomed. He made me send him sexually explicit photos and videos, as well as partake in sexual acts on a webcam. I felt like I was mostly in control at the time, but I definitely wasn’t. I’ve repressed this a lot until about a month ago when a lot of the feelings came forward. I’ve been so scared to tell

anyone as I worried I might be making up how bad it was. It feels good to finally get this off my chest.”

Girl aged 17, Childline

Impact of online sexual abuse on children

Online sexual abuse can have a long-term impact on children and young people’s wellbeing.

Some children and young people told our Childline counsellors that their experience of being sexually abused online had left them feeling scared, embarrassed, ashamed and questioning their self-worth. Others turned to Childline because they were struggling with issues around eating and sleeping following the abuse.

Some young people spoke about having difficulties trusting other people and forming healthy relationships after what had happened to them. And some were having suicidal thoughts as a result of the abuse.

“This guy knows everything about me: my name, address, even where I go to school. I’m terrified he’s going to share these things with other despicable men on the internet. I can’t deal with this anymore, I want to die.”

Girl aged 15, Childline

Other young people told Childline that their experience of online sexual abuse had left them feeling worried or frightened about using online platforms. One girl explained that she had developed a fear of video chats after being sexually abused online, and the growing popularity of video chat platforms during the pandemic was causing her distress. This was having an impact on her education, as she was finding it difficult to take part in remote learning sessions.

“Since lockdown all my friends want to chat on FaceTime and they don’t realise how hard it is for me. I get scared that it will be like the video chats I had with men when I was younger, that someone will hack in and they’ll show their boy bits on the screen. Like, I know my friends wouldn’t do that, but it’s so hard to ration with my brain when it panics. It’s the same when I have to log in to video lessons at school. Most of my class mates think I’m just shy, but it’s cos I’m terrified. I tried to look up stuff about video chat phobias and how to fix them, only I didn’t find any info about what scares me. Now I feel like I’m the odd one out.”

Girl aged 18, Childline

Key themes

Online grooming

Some children and young people talked to Childline about how perpetrators had built a relationship with them online. They mentioned being approached on a range of online platforms:

- social media networks, including Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat
- instant messaging apps, including Discord, Kik and WhatsApp
- live streaming platforms, including Twitch and Yubo
- voice or text chat services built into online multiplayer games, such as Fortnite Battle Royale.

When a perpetrator has made contact with a child on one online platform, they may search for and contact the child on other platforms.

Some children told Childline that their abusers had utilised multiple channels to communicate, for example using one platform to chat at the same time as using another platform to play an online game.

Childline also heard about conversations starting in a public online space such as a forum or group chat, but becoming private.

One 13-year-old boy described how a 19-year-old manager had asked him to become a moderator of an online game. However, the relationship had progressed and the boy was now feeling uncomfortable:

“At first I thought it was cool this manager was giving me extra responsibility on the server. They told me how much they trusted me which made me feel important. Lately though things have got a bit weird, like they say ‘I love you’ a lot - they say it so much that it makes me feel like I have to say it back. We’ve also been watching movies together on Netflix Party, and most of the stuff they want to watch is explicit and meant for adults. I feel trapped as I don’t know how to tell them I feel uncomfortable watching this sort of thing and now I’m beginning to think about all the things they have said to me in the past and realise it’s not right.”

Boy aged 13, Childline

Both Childline and the NSPCC helpline heard about adults posing as children online, in order to form relationships with children and young people. What began as a seemingly platonic online friendship could escalate into sexual abuse.

Some parents who spoke to our helpline were worried that, because their child had special educational needs, additional needs and/or disabilities, they would be more vulnerable to being groomed online.

“I believe my 13-year-old daughter has been emotionally manipulated and groomed online by an adult pretending to be an 11-year-old girl. My daughter is particularly susceptible due to her autism. She has been allegedly talking to this “child” via Discord. The “child” told my daughter about her terrible family life and tapped into my daughter for emotional support. She said my daughter was the only person she had in the world, how much she needed and loved her and encouraged my daughter to say the same. They carried out role plays where they were in a relationship which involved sexual and violent content. The “child” then told my daughter that if she ever stopped hearing from her she may kill herself - this is what alerted my daughter to tell me because she was so worried about her friend. I have stopped my daughter from any further communication and contacted this person to tell them we did not believe they were a child and would be reporting them to the police.”

Father, NSPCC helpline

Loneliness and self-esteem

Some children and young people told Childline that the conditions created by the pandemic made them feel lonely and disconnected from their usual support networks. This led to some of them using online platforms to meet new people, get company and seek support from people they hadn't met face-to-face.

“Because of coronavirus I made a new Instagram account as I was feeling so sad and lonely.”

Girl aged 13, Childline

But sometimes other people took advantage of the situation to carry out abuse. One young person had been using the Discord app to chat and swap tips with gamers (whilst playing games on a different platform). She described the people she had met as being 'like family'. She confided in Childline that she wasn't comfortable with the way a particular relationship was developing, but she didn't want to stop getting the support she valued.

“One of them is my ‘Discord father’, I love him as a dad, but lately he’s been saying he wants to marry me and have children together. Like, I know it’s wrong and that but I don’t say a word as he gives me the validation I need right now.”

Girl aged 13, Childline

Some parents and carers who contacted the NSPCC helpline with concerns about online sexual abuse also spoke about their child having low self-esteem and self-confidence. One mother was worried that a perpetrator had taken advantage of her daughter's desire to be liked:

"My 13-year-old daughter was befriended by an adult male who sent her indecent images of himself. He asked her to send videos of herself doing explicit activities with the promise of becoming boyfriend and girlfriend, which she has done. My daughter is sensible but lacks self-esteem and confidence issues due to a history of being bullied."

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Using online platforms for the first time

With social distancing measures in place, children and young people have been looking for new ways to keep in touch with friends. Some children talked to Childline about using online platforms for the first time. In some cases, they and their friends had been targeted for abuse.

One 12-year-old girl spoke about signing up to use the online chat rooms on the Kids Chat Net website after her friends recommended it, but being approached by strangers and receiving unsolicited images:

"I am twelve and I don't have social media but I wanted to get online and chat to people since my friends had done it and told me it would be fun. It started off fine with the occasional 'hi' and then men started sending d* pics and saying really personal things. I haven't told anyone because if my parents found out they'd both freak out."**

Girl aged 12, Childline

Another 13-year-old girl contacted Childline for help after a frightening experience while using the video chat app Houseparty for the first time:

"The bullies just came out of nowhere and they kept on adding more random people to the chat – one of them looked really old. Two of the main bullies were sending rude images and laughing at us. It was horrible. I don't want my parents finding out, though, in case they confiscate my phone. What should I do?"

Girl aged 13, Childline

Sharing sexual images

Some children and young people talked to Childline about sharing nude images online. For some this was part of a consensual romantic relationship, or a way to explore

their sexuality at a time when they were unable to meet up with other people in person.

Some shared the images with people they hadn't met face-to-face, as a way to get approval or validation.

"I was sending nude pics of myself to people I didn't know in real life. I know I shouldn't have done it but they made me feel better about myself and my body. I just feel boring compared to everyone else, like a waste of space."

Girl, age unknown, Childline

In other cases, the young person was being coerced, forced or pressured into sharing sexual images. Sometimes they had already shared an image and the perpetrator was demanding more. This included threatening to tell parents and carers or make the images public if the young person did not comply.

"This boy asked me for a nude and I did it, even though I knew it was wrong and regretted it. He's now hounding me for more pics, saying he'll post them on my socials if I ignore him. I dunno what I've got myself into – I'm so scared."

Girl aged 13, Childline

Sometimes the young person felt they needed to share the images to strengthen a friendship:

"So, me and this girl from school just started talking throughout lockdown, mostly online. Don't ask me why, but we ended up sending nudes to each other. You probably hear this all the time, but I only did it to make friends. I thought sending her images would make her like me."

Girl, aged 15, Childline

It's a criminal offence to create or share explicit images of a child, even if the person doing it is a child. If sexting is reported to the police, they will make a record but may decide not to take any formal action against a young person.

Some young people who had shared nude images were afraid that they would get in trouble with the police and get a criminal record. Others felt hopeless for the future as they worried about future friends, partners and employers finding out.

"I am worried about a mistake I made a year ago. I sent private photos to a stranger. I know it was incredibly stupid, but I didn't know the law on it. I just feel like it's going to catch up with me and that I'll get a criminal record and won't be successful at all. I also feel as if I can never be with anyone because of what I did as they will think of me differently and be disgusted. I just need it to stop being on my mind 24/7, but I am constantly worrying about it getting out and ruining my life."

Girl, age unknown, Childline

Some parents and carers who spoke to the NSPCC helpline about sexting were unsure of the law surrounding the sharing of sexual images of children. Once they understood, they felt better equipped to take action to protect their child.

“Now you have made me aware that the sharing of sexual explicit images is illegal, I will have another conversation with my son about the seriousness of this and contact the police immediately to report this, thank you.”

Mother, NSPCC helpline

- [Find out more about the legislation on sharing indecent images of children on NSPCC Learning](#)

Sexual exploitation

Some children and young people spoke to Childline about being offered money or electronic gift cards in exchange for online sexual activity. Some of these young people talked about their family being under financial pressure during the pandemic.

“I’m so stupid, I just wanted to be like my friends and have nice clothes. I didn’t want to ask my mum or dad for cash, as they’re struggling enough as it is. I don’t know what I was thinking but I sent pictures of myself to this random guy online who said he’d pay me - but he didn’t give me anything. He’s now threatening to post the pics on Facebook unless I send him more. I’m freaking out right now cos I’ve no idea what to do. If anyone I know finds out about this, I swear my life will be ruined. It’s all my fault.”

Girl aged 14, Childline

Some parents and carers also contacted the NSPCC helpline because they found out their child was being sexually exploited. We heard about perpetrators using well-organised systems to make payments in exchange for sexual images and keep in frequent contact with the young person via a range of devices. Some parents were concerned that the abuser was continuing to communicate with the child despite the child having agreed to cease contact.

“I have found out that my teenage daughter has been sending sexually explicit images through the Kik app to unknown adults and receiving financial gain for this. She opened a bank account that the unknown adults would transfer money into when she sent the images. I discovered this having noticed a bank statement showing a large amount of money. I questioned my daughter until she told me she had been receiving money for sexual images. My daughter begged me to not tell her mother and promised she would stop, but I have since

discovered all her devices are synced so she can send and receive messages and images from a variety of devices and I believe she is still doing this.”

Father, NSPCC helpline

Speaking out

It can be difficult for children and young people to speak out about online sexual abuse. Some told Childline they were afraid of upsetting or disappointing loved ones, and others feared they would be blamed, judged or disowned if they talked about what had happened to them.

For some children, Childline was the first place they had been able to talk about what they had experienced. They felt able to do this because they knew the conversation would remain private.

Childline is a confidential service and only shares a child’s information with other services in exceptional circumstances, for example if a child is in a life-threatening situation, or if they are requesting direct help. Our counsellors always attempt to seek consent from a young person before anything is shared.

Some children and young people thought that reporting their concerns would only make the abuse worse. If the perpetrator was someone they knew, they worried about the impact it would have on their social group:

“I just don’t know what to do at the moment with this boy and it’s making me feel horrible and sick and upset all the time because I have feelings for him. He’s a year above and all the time he tries to get images off of me - it hurts because if I don’t he ignores me. It’s not like I’m gonna block him because he’s friends with all of my friends as well and it would be awkward”

Girl, aged 13, Childline

Some young people believed that there was no point reporting the abuse, as the police and/or online platforms would be unable to locate and stop the abuser.

“You can report users to the moderators, however they do little to nothing as it is 'a waste of their time' and they don't act on the reports due to a lack of evidence.”

Gender unknown, aged 16, Childline

Others were worried about using the same technology that had facilitated their abuse, to ask for help. One girl explained that she wanted to speak with her college tutor

about online sexual abuse she had experienced a while ago, but she was reluctant to use email or text. She said she feared leaving a digital trail and did not want the things she had to say to be recorded. She was also worried about talking over the phone:

“That’s how a lot of the grooming started in the first place.”

Girl, aged 17, Childline

Some children and young people were motivated to speak out about the abuse because they were worried their abuser(s) would continue to target and sexually abuse other children online. They felt it was their responsibility to intervene and bring perpetrators to justice.

“I’ve always wanted to report him but I told myself I’d wait until I was an adult. Although I’m not sure if there would be much point as years will have passed by and he could’ve damaged so many more children during that time - all because I didn’t report him. I really don’t know what to do, that’s why I came here to talk it through.”

Girl, aged 15, Childline

Conclusion

This briefing highlights that while children and young people have been able to access important support via the internet during the coronavirus pandemic, perpetrators have also been provided with more opportunities to target children for sexual abuse online.

The way children and young people have been using online platforms during the pandemic is likely to continue in the long term. As we move towards the ‘new normal’, there is a clear need for expansive and ambitious Online Harms regulation across the UK, to help keep children safe. This includes:

- a Duty of Care on online platforms
- a regulator that has comprehensive investigatory, disclosure and enforcement powers to address online risks
- user advocacy arrangements, funded by an industry levy, to provide counterbalance to industry engagement and ensure children’s needs are represented in regulatory decisions.

Childline and the NSPCC helpline have heard about perpetrators using sophisticated techniques to groom children and young people across a range of online platforms. The Online Harms Bill should require platforms to take a holistic approach to

identifying and responding to online abuse, recognising that online abuse is not always siloed to a particular platform or app.

It can be difficult for children and young people to speak out about online sexual abuse. Some children and young people told Childline they were finding it difficult to ask for help. Some felt ashamed or to blame for what happened to them. Others felt that there was no point in asking for help, as no action would be taken. Online sexual abuse is never the victim's fault and it's important that children are able to get the right support when they need it, without fear of being judged or punished.

Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact Childline and the NSPCC helpline, the counsellors record what they tell us.

The insight in this briefing is taken from those helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions where the counsellors recorded information about children being targeted for sexual abuse online.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC and Childline. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

The time periods

The first time an adult mentioned coronavirus when contacting the NSPCC helpline was 6 January 2020. The first time a child mentioned coronavirus when contacting Childline was 10 January 2020.

For the purpose of this briefing, we have compared the period before the government introduced its stay-at-home rules (6 January – 22 March) with the period since (1 April – 31 August). We have used monthly averages to compare between the 2 time periods.

Data tables

Childline and the NSPCC helpline offer support to children, young people and adults across the UK. People contacting either service can choose to remain anonymous, so we do not always know which part of the UK children live in.

Childline counsellors and helpline advisors code any concerns about young people and sexual activity online as "online sexual abuse". This includes:

- children coming across inappropriate or harmful sexual content online
- children sharing sexual images with a boyfriend, girlfriend or partner
- children being targeted for sexual abuse online (for example grooming or sexual harassment)
- parents or young people asking for advice about keeping safe from online sexual abuse.

In this briefing, we've looked at those NSPCC helpline contacts and Childline counselling sessions where there were concerns about people specifically using the internet to target children for sexual abuse.

Childline counselling sessions where concerns were raised about online sexual abuse

	Before lockdown monthly average	Since lockdown monthly average
All counselling sessions about online sexual abuse	207	230
Counselling sessions about people specifically using the internet to target children for sexual abuse	97	129

NSPCC helpline contacts where concerns were raised about online sexual abuse

	Before lockdown monthly average	Since lockdown monthly average
All contacts about online sexual abuse	117	187

Contacts about people specifically using the internet to target children for sexual abuse	79	126
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+ Further support and information



Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.



Contact our helpline if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child
nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection during coronavirus

