

Protecting people from illegal harms online

Response from the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

February 2024

About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The CSA Centre aims to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response.

Working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector we believe that to tackle child sexual abuse we need to better understand its causes, scope, scale and impact.

Our multi-disciplinary team collates and analyses existing research, policy, practice and the experiences of survivors, and then seeks to fill the gaps with new research, insights and analysis. We use that evidence and insight to develop new approaches and apply learning in practice through training and resources.

We believe that by professionals, researchers, policymakers, businesses, and societies working together, we can tackle child sexual abuse.

Below we outline our response to the above consultation focusing on the scale, impact and risks of child sexual abuse online and highlighting some important considerations on the language used to talk about child sexual abuse.

Scale and nature of child sexual abuse

The CSA Centre conservatively estimates that at least 500,000 children will experience some form of sexual abuse every year in England and Wales, and our latest analysis shows that the number of children being identified by local authorities is not only just the tip of the iceberg, but that the gap is getting wider. These estimates are drawn from the last large-scale maltreatment survey undertaken by the NSPCC in 2009. Since this date the access to, and use of, online devices has expanded significantly for both children and adults, so we expect the extent of sexual harm experienced by children to be significantly greater when including online abuse.

The internet and technology-based communications are now embedded in the daily lives of both adults and children. Digital platforms and devices can bring freedom and opportunity, but online contexts now feature in almost all types of child sexual abuse, so there is also the potential for harm.

While it is difficult to separate online and in-person offending in police data, 38% of sexual offences against children recorded by the police across England and Wales in 2022/23 were imagery offences¹. The true extent of child sexual abuse in online contexts is likely to be far higher.

Our recent publication [*Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts*](#) summarises the available evidence on the scale of online harm.

In a recent US survey, 16% of young adults aged 18–28 reported being sexually abused online before the age of 18; more than a third (36%) of these survivors said they had been abused by people aged 18–25, while one in seven (15%) described abuse by older adults (Finkelhor, Turner and Colburn, 2022).

While it is not generally possible to separate ‘online’ and ‘offline’ offending in police data, one-third (38%) of the 105,286 sexual offences against children recorded by the police across England and Wales in 2021/22 were imagery offences (Karsna and Bromley, 2023). However, the true extent of child sexual abuse in online contexts is likely to be far higher than the level reported to the police (Jay et al, 2022).

Evidence shows that the number of people accessing child sexual abuse imagery continues to grow (Jay et al, 2022). In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) detected child sexual abuse material in more than a quarter of a million web pages. Most sexual images of children reported to the IWF were ‘self-generated’ by children, often alone in their bedrooms, and captured (or ‘capped’) via a phone or computer camera; in many cases, these children had been groomed, deceived or extorted to produce and share the images (IWF, 2022). Children are disproportionately likely to be the victims of sexual offences, according to police records. In fact, new analysis reveals that children are the victims in 40% of all sexual offences - including rape and sexual assault - yet make up just 20% of the population in England and Wales.

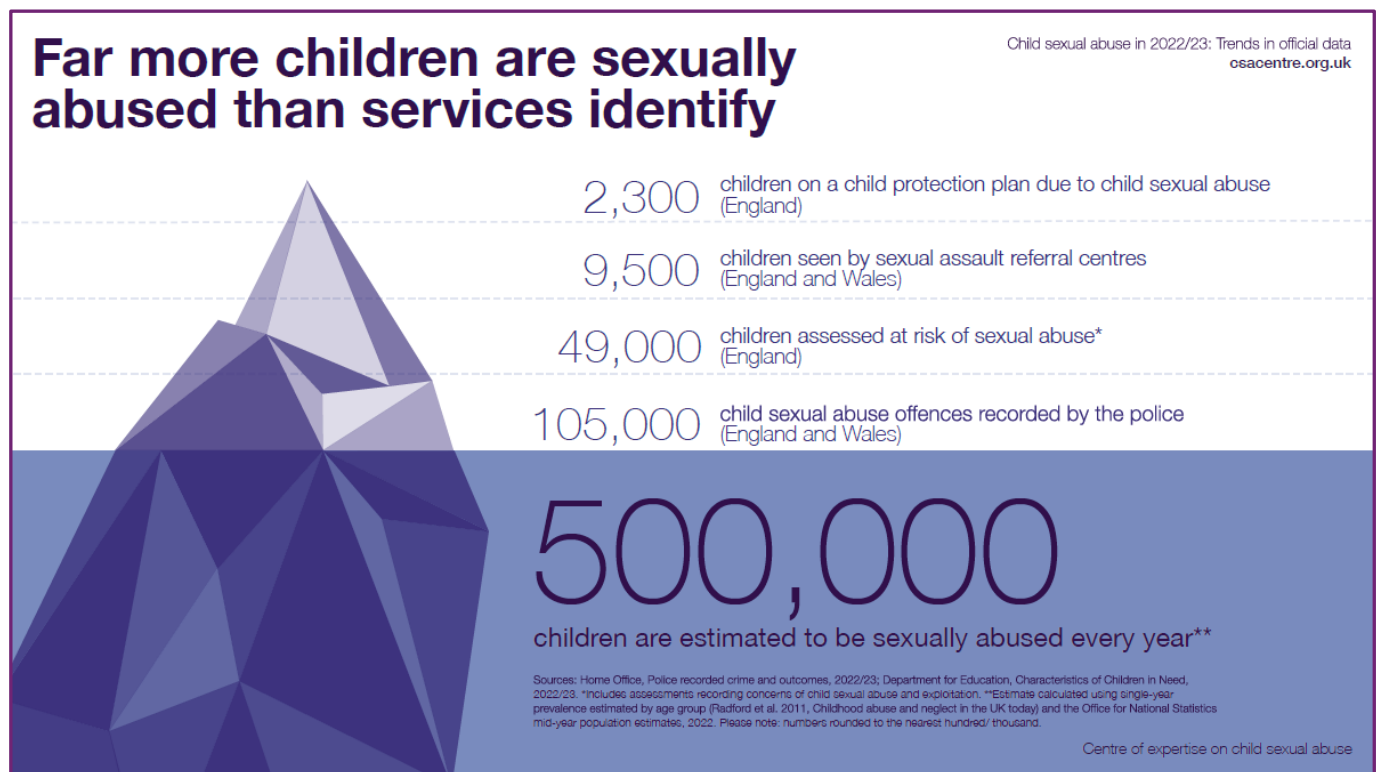
[*Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts*](#) (Brown, 2023)

¹ Trends in official data 2021/22

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) is the only organisation to collate the latest data across local authorities, policing, criminal justice and sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) to explore how child sexual abuse is collectively being identified in England and Wales.

Our new [Child sexual abuse in 2022/23: Trends in official data](#) report found that child protection plans for sexual abuse were at the lowest levels in 14 years, accounting for just 2,290 plans. Child sexual abuse made up the lowest proportion of new child protection plans of all time; just 3.6% in 2022/23, in comparison with 23% in 1993/4. This is despite surveys indicating that children are just as likely to experience sexual abuse as other forms of abuse, including emotional or physical abuse.

Based on this analysis the number of children being identified by local authorities is not only just the tip of the iceberg, but also the gap is getting wider.



Overall, in policing, forces in England and Wales recorded a 2% increase in child sexual abuse offences during the year, making 105,286 offences. This rise was entirely the result of a significant growth in the recording of child sexual abuse image offences, which increased by 14% to the highest number ever recorded in England and Wales (40,472). The recording of all other child sexual abuse offences fell from their 2021/22 levels; the steepest decreases were in the recording of sexual exploitation (–7%) and rape offences (–6%), the latter of which had seen a sharp increase the previous year. Alongside the modest rise in child sexual abuse offences, sexual offences against children over 16 and adults increased by 3%. Both increases were lower than the 5% overall growth in recorded crime (Home Office, 2023b).

Impact of harm from online child sexual abuse

The use of the internet, social media, digital devices and services is embedded in our daily lives. Research indicates that it is also likely to feature in most types of child sexual abuse. It is therefore important to consider the role of online harm within the context of contact offending.

The impact on children of sexual abuse in online contexts can be severe, and varies widely among victims/survivors, but effective intervention, education and support from professionals and the wider family can make an impact.

Some professionals may not feel equipped to help if they are not adept or struggle with technology and online platforms. But the skills that professionals need to support and protect children are those core skills that they use to respond to *any* other form of child abuse.

Again, our publication [Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts](#) summarises the available evidence on the scale of online harm.

The impacts of child sexual abuse in online contexts vary widely, and can be severe and lifelong (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Joleby et al, 2020; Jonsson et al, 2019; Whittle et al, 2013). It can lead to feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame, with children feeling that they participated in some way in the abuse (Quayle et al, 2023; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Leonard, 2010). It also makes victims vulnerable to further sexual abuse, for example when images are used to blackmail them (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017 and 2021; Walsh and Tener, 2022).

When images of a child have been shared, there is the potential for the child to be revictimised over and over again, every time an image is watched, sent or received (ECPAT International, 2020). This impact can persist into adulthood, with victims/survivors reporting that they worry constantly about being recognised by a person who has viewed the material, and some have been recognised in this way (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017; Gewirtz-Meydan et al, 2018; Leonard, 2010). The ongoing availability of the material means that achieving 'closure' can be impossible (Leonard, 2010; Ost and Gillespie, 2018).

Any child who has been sexually abused wants to be able to speak to people who believe them and know how to help them. It is important to provide supportive environments where children can confidently talk about their experiences and expect to receive support that will help them (Quayle et al, 2023; Phippen and Bond, 2022). Being asked about sexual abuse is important (Alaggia et al, 2019).

[Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts](#) (Brown, 2023)

Children who have been sexually abused in online contexts also report that they receive less support than victims of other forms of child sexual abuse. Research suggests that children abused in this context are more commonly 'blamed' by professionals, who can see them as risk-taking or participating in the abuse in some way.

It is not uncommon for professionals to feel unable to help, as they are not 'experts' in the technology. But the core skills required to give an effective response are the same as for any form of child abuse: relationship-based practice, talking to children and accepting what they say.

The children, partners, and wider families of those investigated for online offences often experience trauma, from the initial police visit to the home and for years afterwards. It is important that professionals respond in a way that is empathetic, discreet and non-judgemental.

No individual experience of child sexual abuse is the same; nor is the impact it has on the child at the time, or later in life. Research shows identification and support from professionals is really important as it can play a crucial role in limiting the impact of child sexual abuse and helping adults and children onto the best possible path.

The relationship between sexual abuse and everything else which happens in a victim or survivor's life means it is impossible to know for sure what impacts are as a direct result of sexual abuse alone, but research indicates that being sexually abused in childhood can have several possible mental and physical impacts. Adverse impacts on mental health and wellbeing can include anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders and disturbances, sleep disruption and insomnia and longer-term clinical psychiatric diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder or personality disorders.

Negative impacts on physical health can be seen in general health, gastrointestinal health, gynaecological or reproductive health, pain (both short term and chronic) and impacts on weight and general wellbeing. These physical impacts can often also be linked to mental health impacts. Being sexually abused as a child may also affect sexual functioning and relationships in both adolescence and adulthood. For some adult victims and survivors they may show protective parenting but for others they may have difficulties with creating and maintaining boundaries.

There are many factors which can affect how much an individual may be impacted, such as how old they were when they were abused, how long the abuse lasted, their relationship to those that harmed them, other childhood experiences and their attachment to their parents / carers. Whether they told someone about the abuse at the time and how this was received may be important.

Professionals need to take account of the multiple social inequalities there are across sex, culture, ethnicity, disability status, sexual orientation and gender identity – each alone, or together, which may shape the impact the abuse has on the child and the response the professional provides.

However, much can be done to improve long-term outcomes for children who have been sexually abused. There is evidence that supportive parenting and friends act as protective factors.

Supporting non-abusing parents and other family members is incredibly important; both for them individually but also so they are able to support the child.

A compassionate and consistent response from professionals; providing space for children and adults to tell, believing disclosures, and recognising and responding to signs of child sexual abuse can make a big difference in limiting the impact of abuse.

There are a number of wide-ranging impacts that extend beyond this, including impacts on families. Non-abusing mothers may experience impacts that mirror those of their sexually abused child, and this means that they also need support. Less is known about the impacts on other non-abusing family members including siblings, or on fathers, friends and peers.

How child sexual abuse material offences manifest online

Adults may use online spaces to sexually abuse children by having sexual conversations, viewing and/or sharing child sexual abuse images, communicating with a child with the intention of abusing them in-person, or asking or pressuring a child to perform sexual acts.

Child sexual abuse often happens through mainstream social media platforms and messaging services, despite a perception that it mainly takes place on the 'dark web' or hidden areas of the internet.

Many adults who sexually abuse children are already known to the child, such as family members, friends, or authority figures. Although some women sexually abuse children in online spaces, most adults who view and/or share child sexual abuse material are White men.

Adults who view child sexual abuse images may not have an initial sexual interest in children, and it can start during times of stress, difficulties with personal relationships, loneliness, alcohol or drug addiction, or depression. A common pathway begins with viewing legal pornography.

Some adults may be motivated by curiosity, facilitation of social relationships, sexual arousal or interest, thrill-seeking, financial gain, 'avoiding real life', a compulsion to collect images and they may liken their behaviour to an addiction.

There are many different and complex pathways into the sexual abuse of children, as outlined in the CSA Centre's [Key Messages from Research on Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrated by Adults](#). For all these pathways, people may not abuse if they do not have opportunities to do so. For example, compared with those who sexually abuse children in person, men who commit child sexual abuse imagery offences have been found to have more access to technology and less in-person access to children (Babchishin et al, 2015). Online environments and technology provide easy access to sexual images of children, and to children themselves; this reduces obstacles to offending (Hamilton and Belton, 2022). Furthermore, people's inhibitions may be reduced by a sense that they are anonymous, the spaces they are using appear not to be monitored, and criminal activities seem unregulated (Steel et al, 2023).

Some adults may view or share sexual images of children as a substitute for different forms of sexual abuse; other motivations include curiosity, an obsessive compulsion to collect material, facilitation of social relationships, financial gain, thrill- or sensation-seeking, sexual arousal or interest, and/or 'avoiding real life' (Hamilton and Belton, 2022; Rimer, 2021).

Viewing sexual images of children may start in the absence of a sexual interest in children (Ly et al, 2018). It often starts during times of stress, difficulties with personal relationships, loneliness, substance or addition problems, or depression (Knack et al, 2020; Morgan and Lambie, 2019; Rimer, 2021).

A common pathway into viewing child sexual abuse imagery involves initially viewing legal pornography. Individuals report viewing more extreme material, and material depicting younger individuals, over time (Hamilton and Belton, 2022; Rimer and Holt, 2023). There is very little evidence of men viewing or possessing only child sexual abuse imagery (Steel et al, 2021; Wolak et al, 2011). Many men convicted of child sexual abuse imagery offences liken their behaviour to an addiction (Rimer and Holt, 2023; Seto et al, 2010).

Harmful sexual behaviour online by children and young people

Children's involvement in sexual behaviour through technology can be complicated; they may create images of themselves as part of a sexual relationship, but research suggests some children - particularly girls - report feeling pressure to share images because of coercion, sexual extortion, or trafficking.

Sexual behaviour by under-18s that may be harmful towards themselves or another child, young person or adult, is typically called harmful sexual behaviour, and that includes within online contexts.

While children may be *digital natives* from an early age, this does not necessarily mean that they are equipped to navigate a digital environment safely, and they shouldn't have to do this alone.

Language

The language used to talk about sexual abuse of children including the contexts and nature of harm plays an important role in our collective understanding and recognition of the harm as well as our engagement with prevention. Within a policy, regulatory and enforcement context there is often a desire to 'simplify' communication by using acronyms and jargon, yet we find that their use generally serves to create a distance between the harm and our engagement with it and therefore commitment to prevent

and respond. As Ofcom seeks to engage support from the public, businesses, professionals and government in the application, compliance and enforcement of regulations we encourage careful consideration of the language used to ensure it is accessible and understandable to all and doesn't serve to minimise the issue.

Acronyms

Broadly we advocate avoiding acronyms and using terms in full, so saying child sexual abuse in full rather than CSA and child sexual exploitation rather than CSE. This is important because it makes clear the nature of the behaviour we are talking about, rather than reducing to an acronym, and centres the child who has been harmed. We also find the acronym tends to be another way we, as a society, compartmentalise and distance ourselves from the issue. So, it's another helpful step in challenging this.

Child sexual abuse

It is also important to recognise that the term sexual abuse covers a range of behaviours that take place in a wide range of different contexts. We all tend to have a 'go-to' understanding of what 'sexual abuse' is and that shapes our understanding and response to the issue. We know that it can be helpful to victims and survivors to hear the different contexts of sexual abuse mentioned as it helps them to feel recognised. We saw significant reporting of sexual abuse following the details of the sexual abuse of young footballers coming to light because men in particular felt the abuse they experienced was being recognised. The drivers and motivations that lead to people committing sexual abuse of children also vary between individuals and contexts.

Person that sexually abused

Generally, when referring to people that commit sexual abuse, we seek to name the behaviour rather than the person, so try to refer to the person who sexually abused rather than the sexual abuser or perpetrator. This is important for two reasons:

- To address othering - it is easy to assume that a sex offender is someone that you wouldn't know or come into contact with because they are inherently bad people that you and I don't interact with. But recognising that a person can sexually abuse children opens up who that person might be and that they might have other characteristics and features that mean you might interact with them or even be close to them.
- More broadly, in the context of prevention we need to engage with the fact that committing sexual abuse doesn't have to define that persons' future. This is especially important when we refer to children and young people who display sexually harmful behaviour.

Throughout the documentation provided in the consultation there is extensive reference to the 'perpetrator' including in contexts referring to children and young people who may have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. It would be helpful if the extent of the use of this term could be reviewed.

Relevant publications from the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

We have published a number of reports that may be useful for readers of the guidance, all of which are written to be easily accessible to both an expert and lay audience. It may be helpful to refer to these at various points for those wanting more information about a particular subject. Of particular relevance are the following:

- Karsna, K and Bromley, P. (2024) [*Child Sexual Abuse in 2022/23: Trends in Official Data*](#). Barkingside: Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

This report analyses the latest data across local authorities, policing, criminal justice and sexual assault referral centres, to explore how child sexual abuse is being identified and responded to in England and Wales.

- Brown, S and Trediga, J. (2023) [Key messages from research on harmful sexual behaviour in online contexts](#). Barkingside: Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

This paper brings together learning from existing research on children's use of digital communications technology and the internet – through social media, text messaging, online gaming, message boards, streaming, etc – in relation to this technology's role in their sexual behaviour and the potential for them to be sexually harmed or sexually harm others through its use.

- Brown, S (2023) [Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts](#). Barkingside: Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

This paper brings together learning from existing research on child sexual abuse committed by adults in online contexts, the people who commit that abuse, and their victims

- Vera-Gray, F (2023) [Key messages from research on the impacts of child sexual abuse](#) Barkingside: Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse.

This paper brings together learning from existing research on the impacts of child sexual abuse. It sets out what is known about impact across all forms of child sexual abuse, unless a particular form and/or context for sexual abuse is stated.

Further contact

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