



Sexual harassment online

Sexual harassment is when the child is offended or intimidated by unwanted sexual comments or conduct of a sexual nature.

Sexual harassment can be a form of 'sexual bullying' and can have a coercive aspect. It can be linked to sexting and sexual extortion – for example, if the child is sent unwanted sexual images, or is being pushed towards unwanted sexual behaviours through blackmail.

The person / people engaging in sexual harassment of a child may be adult or child; they may be anonymous or known to the child.

WHAT SEXUAL HARRASSMENT ONLINE MAY LOOK LIKE

Typically, online sexual harassment involves the posting of unwanted comments or sharing content of a sexual nature through social media or other digital or messaging platforms. It can be persistent, targeted and of a bullying nature, designed to shame the young person receiving the comments.

When these behaviours are coupled with requests or demands that the young person reciprocate, or involve some kind of threat or blackmail, the harassment can be associated with online grooming or sexual extortion (see grooming and sexual extortion guides).

WHEN A CHILD MAKES CONTACT DIRECTLY

A young victim of online sexual harassment may feel vulnerable, distressed and confused. Commend the child for making contact and acknowledge their courage for speaking up about their concerns and feelings. Reassuring the young person that they have made the right decision and that you are there to listen and help them is vital. Equally important is making sure that you tell them that it is not their fault and they are not to blame in any way.

Be clear where your helpline stands on confidentiality so the child knows what may happen with information they share. For example, explain that anything they tell you will be private unless they tell you something that makes you think they are in danger and you are able to get them help, in which case you would talk to them about what you are going to do.

Build a relationship and give the child the time and space to open up further and volunteer more

information. Remember to acknowledge the emotional impact of what has happened, and take care not to make assumptions about the situation. Questions should be clear and open-ended, for example:

- When did this first happen?
- Were you asked to do or say anything else that worried you?
- Did you pass on any private information about yourself or share any pictures?
- Do you know who is sending the messages?
- Do you know if any other children have been contacted by that person?
- Has anything that has happened made you feel unsafe?

By listening to the child you will be able to better understand the risk level (is there a current threat or not?) as well as the options available to the child to address the issue (e.g. technical solutions including changing privacy settings, blocking the individuals responsible or reporting them to the service provider).

If a child is unwilling to talk about specifics during the contact, encourage them to call back – give them time and space, if necessary.

Don't make promises about what might happen when discussing the involvement of third parties (e.g. law enforcement) – calmly explore possible outcomes, and how the child feels about them.

Discuss practical options (see below).

WHEN A PARENT / CARER MAKES CONTACT

Commend the parent / carer for coming forward. It is likely that they will feel a range of emotions upon discovering that their child has experienced sexual harassment. They may feel angry, confused, scared and may blame themselves for what has happened.

What is key, is that they understand that it is not their or their child's fault and they are not to blame for what has happened.

Encourage the parent to try to remain calm, to be non-judgmental and to avoid any panicky solutions. In particular, advise parents not to remove their child's internet access – the most likely consequence of such an action would be that the child would not discuss future problems with the parent for fear of being cut-off from their digital lives.

Discuss practical advice (see below) with the parents and remind them that your helpline is available for their child to call for support - but do note that you won't be able to share the content of the call with the parent without the child's consent.

If the parent / carer is aware that their child has been sexually harassed, or suspects that this may be the case, but this has not been disclosed to them by their child, there are a number of things that a parent can do in order to encourage their child to open up. You could suggest the following approaches:

- **Choose the moment carefully.** Do not make your child feel like they have been put on the spot.
- **Find a quiet place.** If your child has built up the courage to disclose a concern, the last thing that they want is to be disturbed.
- **Ask questions.** Try to be non-judgmental and allow your child the opportunity to answer. Try to keep the conversation flowing.
- **Reassure your child.** Tell your child that you believe them and that you are there to help them.

It is important that you both highlight and clarify the potential emotional impact of sexual harassment on the child, as it will help the parent understand the importance of taking a supportive approach to their child. Ask the parent:

- Has there been any changes in their child's behaviour?

- Do they have any concerns for the child's mental health currently or historically?

Gathering this information will help inform you if any subsequent referral to the support services may be required. You should also ensure the parent is aware of any subsequent changes in their child's behaviour, even if there have been no visible changes reported by the parent to you at this stage.

PRACTICAL ADVICE:

Encourage the child to prevent further harassment by adjusting security and privacy settings, and blocking the individual or individuals responsible for the harassment.

Where appropriate, encourage the child to report the sexual harassment. Explore with the child options for reporting the issue - whether to the service provider, to law enforcement or another appropriate authority, including the child's school.

Encourage the child to retain any evidence – for example, taking screenshots and saving chat logs – to help with reporting.

RED FLAGS:

- The child is expressing suicidal thoughts, intentions to self-harm or emotional trauma.
- If sexual content has been shared with a child directly / deliberately by an adult or older child, this may indicate grooming behaviours (see grooming guide).
- The individual responsible for the harassment has access to sensitive content (e.g. sexual images of the young person) and / or information (e.g. home address) about the child which could lead to rapid escalation of the situation, including sexual extortion, potentially placing the young person at risk of abuse.

In the case of red flag issues emerging during your conversation, follow your standard escalation processes for intervention by law enforcement, child protection services, and so on, as appropriate.

