

# Young people's experiences of online sexual extortion or 'sextortion'

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC Helpline contacts to highlight how children and young people are being targeted online by so-called 'sextortion' crimes.

August 2024

## Key findings

- In 2023/24, Childline provided over 900 counselling sessions to young people relating to blackmail or threats to share sexual images online. The NSPCC Helpline handled over 150 contacts from adults concerned about this issue.
- Some young people were being blackmailed for money after someone they'd met online threatened to release sexual images or videos of them.
- Some were being threatened with images that had been stolen from their devices, or with so-called 'fake nudes' created of them by perpetrators.
- Some were being forced to send more explicit imagery to an ex-boy/girlfriend, to prevent further sharing.
- Sextortion can negatively impact a child's mental wellbeing; for some, this had caused feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety and fear. Some even had thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

- Some adults contacting the Helpline wanted practical advice around reporting incidents of sextortion involving children and mitigating the impact of harm, while others wanted to know how to talk to their child about this issue.

## About this briefing

Our Helplines Insight Briefings aim to raise awareness and increase understanding of different topics by sharing the voices of children and adults who are contacting the NSPCC with concerns about a child's welfare or wellbeing.

### What is sextortion?

Advances in online technology, from social media and messaging apps to online gaming and livestreaming, have transformed the way that children and young people interact with others. While this digital landscape can add great value to a child's identity and life experiences, it is not without risks. One such risk is sexual extortion, commonly referred to as 'sextortion.' This is a form of online blackmail that involves the threat of sharing intimate or explicit images or videos to extort money or force someone to do something against their will. (Internet Watch Foundation, 2024).

Perpetrators may not carry out their threats, but we know from the children and adults contacting our helplines that threats like this can be hugely distressing for the young people involved.

In 2023/24, Childline delivered just over 900 counselling sessions to children and young people relating to blackmail or threats to expose or share sexual images online. This was a 7% increase when compared to 2022/23. At the same time, the NSPCC Helpline received over 150 child welfare contacts from adults who were concerned about this issue last year, an increase of 31% compared to 2022/23.

## Children at risk of sextortion

Sextortion is a crime which can impact children of any gender or age, however Childline heard more from boys about this issue in 2023/24 than from girls. More than two thirds (68%) of Childline counselling sessions about blackmail/threats to share sexual images last year (where gender was known) were with boys, compared to 31% for girls.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, there were thematic differences in the types of experiences shared between boys and girls. Counselling sessions with boys tended to revolve around financial blackmail, whereas girls typically spoke about being pressured to send more nude or semi-nude images rather than money.

## Perpetrators of sextortion

While external research (National Crime Agency, 2024) has cited cybercriminal gangs based overseas as a key source of financially motivated sextortion scams, the data from our helplines is limited when it comes to identifying the people responsible. Some children affected by this crime told Childline they were being blackmailed by someone known to them in-person, like an ex-partner. Other children spoke about being targeted by someone they didn't know on social media and other online platforms - someone who, at first, appeared to be another child or young person.

This briefing explores some of the ways in which children and young people can be exploited by this type of crime, the kinds of threats they might face from perpetrators, and the impact this can have on their lives. It also includes advice for parents, carers

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2023/24, Childline delivered almost 200,000 overall counselling sessions to children and young people. Where the child's gender was known, 72% of counselling sessions were with females, 20% with males and 7% with young people who identified as trans or non-binary.

and safe adults on how to spot potential signs, and what they can do when a child's images fall into the wrong hands.

## Terminology

For this briefing, we use 'sextortion' and related terms such as 'blackmail' and 'exploitation' to describe forms of sexual extortion taking place online. We also use a variety of terms to describe 'self-generated' sexual material, including 'sexual images', 'explicit content' and 'nudes' or 'semi-nudes.' We understand that the creation of 'self-generated' content involving children is complex, and can cover a range of motivating factors, from voluntarily produced images shared amongst peers, through to images produced as a result of coercion. We use the term 'self-generated images' to distinguish them from images that are taken or generated by other people.

## About our helplines

Childline is a free and confidential service where children and young people can talk about anything that's on their mind. Our counsellors provide support online and over the phone to children when they need it most. And the Childline website provides children with the information and advice they need to understand their problems, and the tools to express how they are feeling.

The NSPCC Helpline is a service for adults - both the public and professionals - who are worried about a child. The service provides advice, guidance and support - and can take action if a child is being abused or at risk of abuse.

**This briefing contains summarised and anonymised quotes from children, young people and adults which mention online sexual abuse, mental health and suicidal thoughts. Further support is available from Childline and the NSPCC Helpline. Contact details and guidance can be found at the end of the briefing.**

## Obtaining images and initiating extortion

Whenever a child creates and shares sexual images or information about themselves, they no longer have control over how that content is used. And some children may become vulnerable to approaches from people online who wish to sexually or financially exploit them.

Young people contacting Childline spoke of the various ways in which someone was able to obtain nudes, semi-nudes or even 'fake nudes' of them in the first place.

### Images obtained through online grooming

Some of the experiences that Childline heard about were indicative of grooming, a process that perpetrators use to build trust and emotional connection with a child, in preparation for abuse. (CEOP, 2022). Some of the young people who contacted Childline described how they'd been tricked into believing they could trust an unknown account that was trying to connect with them on social media, gaming sites, dating apps and other platforms.

Some told us that they'd been influenced by a profile picture, and any other pictures or videos that had been shared with them. This gave the child the impression that they were speaking with someone the same age, or of the gender they were attracted to.

***"Their profile pic was just some random girl smiling, nothing sexual. There were loads of other pics and videos on their feed too, and it was clear it was the same person. It never occurred to me at the time that the pics might belong to someone else. It was only once things turned flirty and they convinced me to send nudes that I realised they were a fake. They messaged to say they'd been playing me and that I had to pay***

***them, otherwise they would release my nudes and my reputation would be destroyed."***

*Boy, aged 16, Childline*

Some young people recalled being reassured by the fact that they appeared to share mutual friends with the perpetrator<sup>2</sup>. Others realised, over the course of their initial conversations, that they shared similar interests, which they said made them feel closer and more secure around them.

**"This 'girl' messaged me on Discord asking me all these questions about what games I liked, and she seemed to be into the same stuff as me. I was a bit sceptical that she'd just contacted me out the blue like that but, I can't lie, it felt nice having things in common. I should have known it was too good to be true. Eventually, I got a call from a number I thought belonged to the girl but instead it was a man with a foreign accent. By that point it was too late - they already had my nudes."**

*Boy, aged 18, Childline*

Some young people referenced the amount of time and attention the perpetrator had given them during their early interactions - some chats lasting several hours - or to the compliments they were given on a regular basis. Young people told us how gestures like this made them feel special, wanted, and like they were in a relationship.

---

<sup>2</sup> This perception of having mutual friends may be reflective of another tactic that groomers use to target multiple children online at once. (Lorenzo-Dus, Izura and Perez-Tattam, 2016). If two children in the same network become targeted, they may be fooled into thinking their offender has the approval of their peers.

**"I've never sent pictures of myself before, but then one night I got chatting with this guy online who I'd never met but, like, he just got me. We stayed up all night chatting and he would say all these nice things and made me feel so good about myself – it felt like someone actually wanted me."**

*Girl, aged 14, Childline*

Some of the young people who contacted Childline mentioned they'd been offered money or virtual currency within online games in exchange for sending nudes. Offering something of value like this is another tactic that groomers sometimes use to build a child's trust.

**"Something happened with this guy which I'm kind of ashamed about. We met on this game I like. He seemed nice at first but then slowly he started asking for more information, then pics of myself. Sometimes the guy would buy me things in the game as a reward for sending him pics. I can't afford to buy any of that stuff myself, so it felt nice"**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

**"Some guy added me on Snapchat and kept DM'ing me. I ignored him at first but then he said he'd pay money if I sent him nudes. I know it's crazy, but I thought if I could get some quick cash, I'd be able to buy nice things for me and my mum. So I sent him some pics but without showing my face. Next thing I know, this guy comes back threatening to post my nudes to everyone I know if I don't send more. I can't believe I let him trick me like that. I feel so stupid."**

*Girl, aged 14, Childline*

While for some young people, the journey from initial contact and perceived safety through to sexual chat and coercion happened gradually, over a long period of time, for others, this happened very quickly. Childline heard reports of young people receiving requests for sexual images within minutes of chatting to someone online.

**"I got tricked into sending a photo to someone on Snapchat. They added me on Insta saying they were a 17-year-old girl. She asked me if I had Snapchat so I said yes and added her. Then all of a sudden she sent me loads of pics of her naked and kept asking me to send something back."**

*Boy, aged 17, Childline*

Another experience that young people told us about was of perpetrators inviting them to move conversations onto other platforms or apps; this would involve a switch from a social media or gaming platform to a private messaging app. Cross-platform invitations such as this are in keeping with the isolation tactics used by groomers.

Significantly, it was at this pivotal moment - of moving from a public to a private space - that some young people noticed the perpetrator's messages became increasingly sexualised - and it wasn't long before they were being asked to send intimate photos or videos.

**"I received a message on Wizz which is an app for teens to make new friends. It was from a girl and she came across as nice and friendly, so I carried on chatting to her. After an hour or so, she asked for my number so we could chat over text - so I sent it to her. That's when things started to change and her messages suddenly became flirty. She sent photos of herself semi-nude, and then said it was 'my turn' to return the favour. Due to how she came across earlier, I went and trusted her. I**



**only sent 2 nudes but that was enough for her. She said she was going to post these nudes to all my followers unless I paid her £100."**

*Boy, aged 16, Childline*

Some young people said they were given a false sense of security around sharing intimate content, either because they were communicating on a platform where messages were deleted automatically, or because the person they were interacting with had promised to keep things private between them – only to find that their images had been recorded or screenshotted without their knowledge.

**"Please, I need someone to help me. I was on a video call with someone and I showed them parts of my body – not for long, like 5 seconds. I didn't realise the person was recording me at the time. They said they'd delete it but only if I sent them money."**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

### Images obtained through hacking

In contrast to the grooming model of trust and relationship building, Childline also heard stories in which children and young people started receiving threats almost straightaway.

Some young people told us their phone, device or social media account had been hacked and that someone had managed to acquire intimate content of them as a result. In some cases, young people said they weren't sure if they'd been hacked or not - they were simply told by the perpetrator that this had happened, and that they

would make their images public unless demands were met. Regardless of whether these threats of hacking turned out to be genuine or not, the impact this had on the child's wellbeing was equally distressing.

**“I can't believe I'm saying this but someone – I've no idea who - has hacked into my Instagram account and gained access to my nudes. They messaged me last night saying they're gonna share my nudes with all my contacts unless I pay them money. Please, I'm freaking out right now and I don't know what to do.”**

*Boy, aged 14, Childline*

## Fake nudes

Childline counselling sessions revealed another model of sextortion, one in which a child's images or videos used as blackmail were not requested, coerced, or stolen, but digitally manufactured. In this scenario, a young person would be sent a composite of two or more images (typically made up of their face and someone else's body) which made it look like the young person was naked or engaged in sexual activity.

Young people used the term 'fake nudes' when talking to Childline about this issue. There were also references to 'deepfakes', 'photoshopped' images and 'AI' (artificial intelligence) - even if the children involved weren't entirely sure how the images had been created. Under UK law, it is illegal to make, distribute or possess a fake or 'pseudo-photograph' of a child under 18, just as it is for real images of children. (Protection of Children Act, 1978; Criminal Justice Act, 1988).

One young person told Childline that fake images of them were so convincing, they worried they wouldn't be believed by their parents.

**"A stranger online has made fake nudes of me. It looks so real, it's my face and my room in the background. They must have taken the pictures from my Instagram and edited them. I'm so scared they will send them to my parents. The pictures are really convincing, and I don't think they'd believe me that they're fake."**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

### Sharing images within a relationship

Another form of sextortion reported to our helplines was that carried out in the context of what the young person described as a romantic relationship. In this scenario, intimate content that had previously been shared with a 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' was later being used against the child as blackmail. Rather than involving demands for money, young people described being asked for sexual images, recordings or to engage in sexual behaviours.

For some young people, even the initial sharing of images had not been entirely voluntary. Some spoke of boy/girlfriends begging or harassing them for nudes; threatening to break up with them if they didn't send nudes; or making them believe that sending nudes was the only way to prove their love.

**"I was dating this boy in the year above and he asked me for nudes. I said no at first, but he kept insisting, saying he would break up with me if I didn't. To be honest, it felt special being with someone older than me, and I didn't want it to end, so I went along with it. Then later, we were texting and out of nowhere he said he would share my nudes on Insta unless I did sexual favours. That's when I stopped talking to him**

**and I've been so paranoid ever since. Like, if he posts this on his story, everyone from my year group will see."**

*Girl, aged 14, Childline*

## Escalation

When children and young people are targeted for sextortion, the blackmail they receive may not only happen once; rather, it can become part of a series of escalating demands and threats.

### Escalating demands

Among the Childline counselling sessions relating to financial blackmail, some young people revealed that they'd already sent money to a perpetrator - hoping that this would resolve their situation and they'd be left alone - only to find the perpetrator coming back with further demands. This included demands to pay a higher ransom (figures mentioned to our helplines ranged from £20 to as much as £3,000) or, in some cases, demands to pay in regular instalments.

**"I recently got tricked into sending nudes to whom I thought was a girl, but I now know to be a grown man. They threatened to post my nudes on socials unless I paid them. At first, they wanted £20 so I sent it to them. Then they came back asking for £30, £50, sometimes more."**

*Boy, aged 16, Childline*

**“She said she was going to post these nudes to all my followers on Instagram unless I paid her £100. I paid her the £20 I had and now she’s saying I’ve got to pay her £10 a week. I’m so scared this might ruin my life. I don’t even want my money back, I just want those photos to be deleted. Please help me.”**

*Boy, aged 16, Childline*

Similarly, where young people were being blackmailed for sexual favours, some told Childline that the demands weren’t only for more images but also for more explicit content; this included pressure to strip or perform live on web camera.

**“I sent nudes to this boy on Snap. I thought I could trust him but I was wrong cos he saved the images to his camera roll. Now he’s threatening to post them to my friends and family unless I do stuff on FaceTime. I don’t know how to handle this, I’ve never been so anxious in my life.”**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

Just as the severity of demands tended to increase for these young people, so too did the volume of messages that young people received. Some young people spoke of being bombarded with messages across various platforms and media, to the point this became overwhelming for them.

This was the case for one 16-year-old boy, who told us he was still being targeted by someone online even after blocking them.

**“They’ve been hounding me practically every day by email, text and phone. I’ve tried blocking them, but they keep coming back under new accounts – it’s non-stop and I can’t take it anymore.”**

*Boy, aged 16, Childline*

## Escalating threats

Along with the threat of public exposure, young people contacting Childline also spoke of other threats they'd received to keep them doing something against their will.

Some young people described how the perpetrator had tried to make them feel like a criminal for creating and sharing nudes - and had threatened to report them to the police unless demands were met. Faced with such threats, these young people told us they felt scared and confused as to whether they'd broken the law or not.

**"Yesterday my ex contacted me online and told me that if I didn't send him more nudes and videos he would leak the pictures he already had. He also said if I tried to tell anyone he would report me for sending child porn<sup>3</sup> to a minor – even though he was the one who insisted on them. I've been doing a lot of research and apparently it's illegal to take pictures of myself in that way and send them to someone else. Like, is that true? I honestly don't know what to think or how to handle this."**

*Girl, aged 16, Childline*

Some young people shared fears of being located and harassed in real life, after the perpetrator had threatened to release personally identifying information of them

---

<sup>3</sup> Using the term 'child pornography' should be avoided. 'Child pornography' implies consent on behalf of the child, yet children can never be complicit in their own abuse – including when they are groomed and manipulated into sharing sexual images of themselves. At the NSPCC, we talk about "child sexual abuse materials" to ensure that we don't minimise the impact of a very serious crime and accurately describe abuse materials for what they are. (NSPCC, 2023)

online, such as their name, address or phone number. This threat was sometimes referred to as 'doxxing' or 'doxing'.

**"I'm being blackmailed by someone on Discord. They've got pics and texts of me talking about really personal stuff. Now they're demanding nudes or they'll doxx me on other servers. I'm scared they know where I live."**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

Threats of violence and death were also reported, albeit in a minority of cases. For example, one girl who contacted Childline recalled how someone had tried to control her by threatening to hurt or kill himself.

**"I was only 14 when it started, this older guy convinced me to send him some pictures. Once he had them, he said he'd share them if I didn't do what he said. He also threatened to hurt or kill himself if I didn't keep sending more pictures, more videos. Back then, I felt like I couldn't make it stop, but then I found out he was doing the same thing to other girls too and I was able to get help."**

*Girl, aged 18, Childline*

## Effects of sextortion

Sextortion can have a long-lasting negative impact on a child's wellbeing, as well as their ability to trust and seek help from others.

## Self-blame

Some of the young people who contacted Childline told us they felt guilty and ashamed, believing that they were somehow responsible for what had happened to them. Descriptions of low self-esteem were also apparent amongst this group of children, with some describing themselves as stupid, disgusting or pathetic.

**"I feel so stupid about the whole thing, knowing that an explicit photo of me is out there and it's all my fault."**

*Boy, aged 15, Childline*

**"My parents know what happened and so does my school. They keep on saying I'm a 'victim', but I don't feel like one cos, like, I still sent the images, even though I knew deep down it was wrong. How pathetic is that?"**

*Girl, aged 13, Childline*

## Social isolation and trust issues

For some, this experience had impacted their social lives. Some told us they felt lonely, as they were too ashamed or embarrassed to tell anyone else; some were being bullied after their nudes had been shared on social media; while some questioned whether they'd be able to trust other people in their lives again.

**"Someone made a fake nude of me and sent it to all my followers. I was getting bullied so much after that. Every time I looked at my phone,**



**there were more and more comments. I've deleted the app now cos it was all getting too much."**

*Boy, age unknown, Childline*

**"School is unbearable right now, I've been trying to avoid friends in case they start asking questions. I'm so embarrassed about the whole situation, I think I will find it hard to trust anyone ever again."**

*Boy, aged 15, Childline*

## Mental health issues

The persistent threat of exposure had left some young people struggling with mental health issues, including anxiety, stress, difficulty sleeping and even thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

**"It was a long time ago since I was blackmailed online, but I'm still shaken up by it and I've been having suicidal thoughts. I've not spoken to anyone else about this before – not even my mum – cos I've been so worried about judgement and things like that. I can't lie, it's been nerve-racking talking to Childline today but a relief at the same time. Thank you for taking the time to listen."**

*Girl, 14, Childline*

Some young people expressed feelings of hopelessness, as they believed their nudes, and the associating stigma, would stay with them forever.

**“I made a mistake a year ago after I sent private photos to a stranger and they blackmailed me for money. Nothing actually happened but I still have deep anxiety about it cos there is always the possibility that my nudes will get leaked. I know I should let go of the past, but I just don’t know how.”**

*Girl, aged 17, Childline*

### **Fear of repercussions**

Underpinning many of the stories that young people shared was a sense of fear. Some young people told us they weren't able to confide their experience to others as they were afraid of what might happen. Some were afraid of disappointing or upsetting loved ones, and being judged; some were afraid of bringing shame to the family name or community; some were afraid of getting into trouble with the police and getting a criminal record; while some feared this could harm their education or future career.

Another key fear for this group of young people – and another barrier for them speaking out – was that their phones or devices would be taken away from them as punishment.

**“I’m not sure what to do because I’m only 16 and I don’t want anything bad on my name. It would ruin everything – my education, my career, my friendships. No one else knows about this and I’m afraid to tell my parents - they’ll probably take my phone and tablet away, and never forgive me for what has happened.”**

*Girl, aged 15, Childline*

## Advice for parents, carers and safe adults

Given how hard it can be for young people experiencing sextortion to seek help, it's important that parents, carers and other safe adults know what signs to look for, and how to support children who may be at risk. Professionals working with young people should familiarise themselves with the topic to help educate parents and carers in supporting their children.

### Spotting the signs

Any unexplained changes in a child's behaviour, mood or routine could be an indicator that they are being sexually extorted. For example, the child may appear upset or withdrawn; there may be changes in their sleep pattern or appetite; they may be avoiding school or social situations; or they may be spending significantly more or less time online than usual.

One parent who contacted the NSPCC Helpline told us how they'd noticed their son had been acting quiet and asking to borrow money without explanation.

**"My son didn't come forward straight away, but I could tell something wasn't right, like he'd been spending more time in his room and asking to borrow money from me and his mum, for no apparent reason. It was only when we challenged him on this that he broke down and showed us all the messages on his phone."**

*Parent, NSPCC Helpline*

Similarly, another parent said they'd become suspicious of their son's online spending.

**"I only found out after the bank had flagged unusual payments from my son's account. I'm not mad at my son, not at all. I'm just glad we found out when we did, so we can get him help."**

*Parent, NSPCC Helpline*

Encouraging parents and carers to have regular conversations with their child will help them to learn more about their child's online world; where they go, what they do and when. And the more adults understand those behaviours, the easier it will be to spot any unusual changes.

### Talking to children and young people

Among the contacts to the NSPCC Helpline last year relating to sextortion, some people were calling for practical advice and resources for keeping their child safe online, while some wanted advice on how to talk to their child about this issue. This was the case for one father who was struggling to engage with his teenage son.

**"I can see how devastated he is by all this. My partner and I have done our best to console him, but he doesn't want to talk – he can barely look us in the eye. I just don't want him to think we're mad at him or that he's done anything wrong."**

*Parent, NSPCC Helpline*

If you're talking to a young person who has been affected by sextortion, it's important to remain calm, reassuring and non-judgmental. Other things to consider include:

- Give your full attention to the child and keep your body language open and encouraging.
- Respect pauses and don't interrupt the child.
- Let them go at their pace – and remember that it may take several conversations for them to share what's happened to them.
- Make sure they know they are not to blame for what has happened.
- Respect their wishes for privacy – they may not want anyone else to know.
- Reassure them that any information they do share with you, or with other trusted adults, will be treated seriously.
- Remind them that they can come to you, or another adult they trust, for further support.

Also keep in mind the child's age and ability, and what language or resources might be most appropriate for them.

### Supporting young people to remove nude images of themselves online

A key concern for young people who've been sexually extorted is whether images of them can be taken down from the internet.

Some young people who contacted Childline mentioned that they'd already taken practical steps to block and report someone on the platforms where they were being contacted and, if necessary, where their images had been shared. However, some told us they felt frustrated and let down by platform providers who they said had been slow to respond and act upon their reports. In some cases, young people had not heard back from platforms at all, while their images remained online.

**"Someone has leaked explicit photos of me on Snapchat after I refused to give them money. I have reported the account on Snapchat but it's**

**still up! It's all pointless anyway - by the time it's taken down, thousands of people will have seen my pics and saved them. I feel like these pics will haunt me wherever I go and I'll never get rid of them."**

*Girl, aged 18, Childline.*

To support young people in this process, Childline and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) have developed **Report Remove**, a free online tool that allows young people under 18 in the UK to confidentially report sexual images and videos of themselves, in an effort to have them removed from the internet.<sup>4</sup> (NSPCC, 2023). The IWF can even pre-emptively block imagery that has not yet been shared online, as long as a young person has reported the imagery that is at risk of being shared. Childline will keep the young person informed at every stage of their report, and will offer further support if needed.

For some of the young people contacting Childline last year, simply learning that a tool like Report Remove existed was a great reassurance to them.

**"Thank you for sharing Report Remove with me. I've been so stressed out about all this, I haven't been able to sleep at night. I don't even know if my nudes have been posted or not, but just knowing that something can be done about it is a massive relief. Thanks again for being so helpful and understanding."**

*Boy, 17, Childline*

---

<sup>4</sup> The IWF can remove images that are public or available to anyone on the internet. However, they won't be able to remove images or videos on encrypted networks like WhatsApp, or which are saved on a person's phone or computer. For further details, visit [Report Remove on the Childline website](#).

## Other steps for safeguarding children and young people

The National Crime Agency (NCA) has issued the following advice to caregivers if their child says that someone is trying to trick, threaten or blackmail them online:

- **Do not pay the perpetrator** - even if you are tempted, as there is no guarantee that this will stop the threats.
- **Stop all communication** with the perpetrator and block them on all platforms to prevent further manipulation or harassment.
- **Avoid deleting anything** that could be used as evidence such as messages, images, telephone numbers, and bank account details.
- **Report to the police or CEOP:** call 101 or 999 if there is an immediate risk of harm to your child. Or you can use the CEOP Safety Centre to report any online blackmail attempts.

(National Crime Agency, 2024)

## Remember to look after yourself

Discovering that a child or young person has experienced such a distressing crime as sextortion can be hard on those who care about them. Some may feel shocked, angry or even ashamed by what is happening. While it is vital to support young people at risk swiftly, calmly and without judgement, it is just as important to look after your own wellbeing.

For expert advice and support, you can call the NSPCC Helpline on **0808 800 5000** or email [help@NSPCC.org.uk](mailto:help@NSPCC.org.uk).

## Conclusion

Digital technology moves at such a fast pace, it can be hard to keep up with the apps and sites that young people are using, and, more importantly, their associated risks – including that of sextortion. This briefing helps to shed light on this crime using the voices of young people and adults contacting our helplines.

Childline counselling sessions last year revealed the various ways in which sextortion can occur. Some young people told us they'd been tricked or groomed into sharing sexual images of themselves on social media and other platforms; some told us they'd been hacked and a perpetrator had gained access to their images; some spoke of being blackmailed with faked photos created of them by a perpetrator; while some were being pressured for more explicit content or sexual favours by a former 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend', to prevent further sharing.

These insights also speak to the malicious tactics that perpetrators often use to extort money from young people and coerce them into unwanted actions. Chief among these was the threat of releasing sexual images or videos of a child (whether genuine or artificially created) to the internet. In addition, young people also told us they'd received threats of so-called 'doxxing' (the act of publishing private information about someone without their consent), threats of violence, and threats of criminal prosecution, in which perpetrators had accused them of creating 'child pornography'.

Young people who contacted Childline with concerns of sextortion were wrestling with a range of difficult feelings about their experience, including guilt, shame, confusion, anxiety and fear. For some, these feelings made it hard for them to reach out for support, as they worried about upsetting others, being judged or even punished.

Children and young people should never be made to feel responsible or complicit in their own abuse. That's why, when supporting victims and survivors of sextortion, it's



so important to reassure them that **they are not to blame for what has happened** – and that help and support is available.

Measures such as blocking and reporting on social media, and Childline and IWF's Report Remove tool can help to mitigate the potential harm of sextortion on children, and disrupt perpetrators from exploiting children further.

However, it is not enough to be dealing only with the aftermath of this crime. Tech companies have a vital role to play in preventing this harm from occurring. That's why the NSPCC strongly supports the Online Safety Act. Platforms should be acting now and putting in place proactive measures which prevent, detect and disrupt abuse, making child safety a priority. This is all the more critical with regards to messaging services currently using, or proposing to use, end-to-end encryption, a security method in which messages cannot be seen or accessed by anyone other than the sender and receiver. (CEOP, 2022). Such technology presents a serious risk to child safety, if poorly implemented, as people who seek to groom, coerce and extort children online will continue to go unnoticed.

- **For more information, guidance, and training to help create safer online spaces for children, visit NSPCC Learning.**

## Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact Childline and the NSPCC helpline, we keep a record of what they tell us. This includes choosing a 'main concern' from a controlled list. For Childline counsellors, the main concern is the subject that the child

talked about the most. For Helpline child protection specialists, the main concern is the subject that poses the most significant potential risk to the child.

Only one main concern can be applied per contact, however within that main concern, counsellors and child protection specialists can choose multiple 'sub-concerns' from another pre-defined list. The insights in this briefing are taken from Childline and Helpline contacts in 2023/24 recorded under 'Blackmail/threats to expose/share sexual images online', a related sub-concern of 'Online sexual abuse and exploitation.'

Our analysis involved reading through the relevant case notes written by Childline counsellors and Helpline child protection specialists, in order to identify key themes that children, young people and adults were talking to us about.

Information drawn from Childline counselling sessions isn't necessarily representative of the UK child population. Children typically contact Childline when there is something that they are worried about, so they are self-selecting groups coming to us in times of need.

Quotes are based on real Childline and Helpline contacts, but all names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC.

## References

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) (2024) **Sexually Coerced Extortion or 'Sextortion' Help & Support**. [Accessed 15/04/2024]

<<https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion/>>

National Crime Agency (NCA) (2024) **NCA issues urgent warning about 'sextortion'**. [Accessed 29/04/2024]

<<https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/nca-issues-urgent-warning-about-sextortion>>

Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2022) **What is sexual grooming?** [Accessed: 10/06/2024]

<<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/articles/what-is-sexual-grooming/#:~:text=Grooming%20is%20a%20process%20offenders,do%20if%20you%20have%20concerns>>

Lorenzo-Dus, N., Izura, C. and Perez-Tattam, R. (2016) **Understanding grooming discourse in computer-mediated environments**. Discourse, Context and Media, 12: 440-450

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2016.02.004>>

**Protection of Children Act 1978**. [Accessed 31/07/2024]

<<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1978/37>>

**Criminal Justice Act 1988**. [Accessed 29/05/2024]

<<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/33/part/XI/crossheading/possession-of-indecent-photograph-of-child>>

NSPCC (2023) **Why language matters: why we should never use 'child pornography' and always say child sexual abuse material** [Accessed 20/05/2024]

<<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/why-language-matters/child-sexual-abuse-material>>




NSPCC (2023) **Remove nude images shared online**. [Accessed 29/05/2024]

<<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-reporting/report-remove/>>




Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) (2022) **What is end-to-end encryption?** [Accessed 29/05/2024]

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/professionals/our-views/E2EE/>

### Further support and information

-  Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.
-  Contact the **NSPCC helpline** if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child.
-  Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection.

### + More ways to help you protect children

-  Take our Sharing nudes and semi-nudes training course  
[nspcc.org.uk/training/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes](https://nspcc.org.uk/training/sharing-nudes-and-semi-nudes)
-  Sign up to our weekly current awareness email newsletter  
[nspcc.org.uk/caspar](https://nspcc.org.uk/caspar)
-  Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information and resources about online safety