

Insights on responses to children experiencing online harm and abuse

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC Helpline contacts to share the types of responses children receive after they have told someone about their experiences of online harm or abuse

August 2024

Key Findings

- In 2023/24 Childline provided 2,892 counselling sessions to children where their main worry was online harm and safety or online sexual abuse and exploitation
- In 2023/24 Helpline responded to 2,199 child welfare contacts where the main concern was online harm and safety or online sexual abuse and exploitation
- Childline heard from young people who had spoken to peers, parents, schools, police and online platforms about their experience
- NSPCC Helpline heard from parents wanting advice on how to respond to their child's online experience or how to improve their initial response

- Some children told Childline counsellors that they were given emotional and practical support like reporting to platforms or changing safety settings on devices and accounts
- Some children were punished, made to feel the online harm was their fault, or told there was nothing that could be done about what happened
- Even when a child was given a supportive response, there could still be on-going negative impacts from the online harm they experienced

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.

➤ [Read more of our helpline insight briefings on our NSPCC Learning website](#)

In 2023/24, Childline delivered almost 188,000 counselling sessions. In almost 2,900 of these, children and young people wanted to talk to counsellors about their worries around online harm and safety or online sexual abuse and exploitation. This was a 12 per cent increase in counselling sessions on this topic from 2022/23. During the same period, the NSPCC Helpline handled over 75,600 contacts from adults concerned about a child's welfare. Over 2,000 of these contacts to Helpline were about online harm and safety and online sexual abuse and exploitation.

The internet is a place where children can play, learn, and connect with others. However, it can also put them at risk of abuse and harm. Children can be groomed online by people known to them offline, as well as those they have only met in online spaces. Children can also be at risk online from content they access, whether purposefully or not. When a child experiences abuse or harm online it can be challenging for adults to know how to respond. The online world changes quickly and

new risks emerge with those changes. Even if it is worrying them, a child may not realise that what they have experienced, or what they are currently experiencing, is harmful or abuse.

When children spoke to Childline about online abuse and harm, counsellors recorded 898 instances where the child had told another child or an adult about their concern. The response a child receives when they experience online harm or abuse is crucial to safeguarding them from further harm and supporting their wellbeing going forward. By looking at the types of responses children received from those around them, and from technology platforms, we can gain insight into what a helpful and appropriate response could entail.

This briefing contains summarised and anonymised quotes from children, young people and adults which mention online sexual abuse and mental health. Further support is available from the NSPCC Helpline and Childline.

+ Sources of support



Contact NSPCC Helpline by phone on 0808 800 500 or email

help@nspcc.org.uk



Contact Childline by phone on 0800 1111 or by chat or email

www.childline.org.uk/

Children's experiences of online harms

It can be difficult for a young person to recognise that they're experiencing, or have experienced, online harm or abuse. Although some young people will feel worried, confused or upset by what is happening, some may not feel that anything is wrong



until after their experience. Sometimes young people won't realise until they have a conversation with someone else about what happened.

For some young people, Childline was the first place they spoke to someone about their experiences and concerns about online harm and safety.

In some cases, children told Childline counsellors that they recognised signs to be concerned about their safety or had a "gut feeling" that something was wrong with their interaction with others they met online.

"I'm worried I have been groomed online by a guy who is 28. I met him on a gaming platform. Then we started calling and FaceTiming. He treated me nicely, but he started to make sexual comments about me, which made me feel uncomfortable. I also found out that he was making comments to other young girls too. I'm feeling mixed emotions about what happened, and I want to know what will help me work through this. I want to be able to cope with the anger that I'm feeling. I'm mad at myself because I had a gut feeling that it was wrong, and I'm mad at him."

Young person, age not disclosed, Childline

"There's a man who's 40 years old at a club that I used to go to. He started messaging me about stuff to do with the club, but now he messages me every day, even if I don't reply. I've started to feel uncomfortable with some of the stuff that he's been saying, like wishing he could be with me. I just have a strange gut feeling that it's inappropriate, so I haven't been answering his messages. I think I'm going to talk to my mum tomorrow and will save the screenshots of the messages in case she needs them to report his behaviour."

Girl, aged 15, Childline

In other cases, children contacted Childline after others became aware of the online abuse and harm that they had experienced. Some children were confused about their situation and did not understand why those around them were concerned or were worried that they had been groomed.

“I feel like I have been groomed online by an older lad who kept asking me to share sexual pictures. Lots of people found out, including my counsellor and the police. I’m feeling annoyed and confused about the way everyone has reacted. I had to block this lad, but I really struggled with it as I feel I can’t live without him. I’m still in contact with him.”

Young person, age not disclosed, Childline

Responses from peers

Children and young people who had experienced online harm told Childline counsellors that they sought emotional and practical support from their peers.

Young people described how other children/peers/friends’ responses to online harms of another child were to offer support through listening and caring. Some young people explained that their friends had taken action to support them by reporting accounts or images to online platforms, such as Instagram.

“I’ve found out that someone has created an Instagram account using my picture. The account has been posting pictures of porn and making out that it’s me. My friends have reported the account to Instagram to

try to get the account closed down. I've also told my parents and they've been really supportive. They've also reported the issue to Instagram."

Girl, aged 16, Childline

However, some peers were not supportive and blamed the young person for what they had experienced online.

"I was groomed online a few years ago when I was in primary school. Someone blackmailed me online to send explicit photographs of myself to them, or I would be murdered. I was also sent pornographic videos. I feel really guilty about what happened. I told my friends, but they told me it was my own fault."

Young person, age not disclosed, Childline

Responses from parents and carers

Children and young people described a range of responses from their parents when they told them, or they found out, about online harm or abuse that had occurred.

Supported and heard

Some children felt supported, cared for, and listened to. Childline heard from young people who felt "a weight had been lifted" in being able to talk about what they had experienced.

"I was added to a group chat of strangers by someone who I used to be friends with. On the chat someone shared a picture of a man's privates.

I've told my parents and my school. My mum is helping to change my settings on WhatsApp. I feel like a weight has been lifted since talking about the picture."

Young person, aged 11, Childline

Some children were supported and encouraged to contact Childline, including with parents in the room whilst they were on the call or chat.

"A few weeks ago, I received some sexually explicit messages on Snapchat. I thought they were from a friend, but I didn't know them. I spoke to my mum at the time as I was worried and upset about what had happened. I now have periods when these memories are triggered and get really upset. I feel like I don't have the thoughts when I'm busy, but when things are quiet the thoughts come back. My mum is here with me, and she's been really supportive and encouraged me to talk to you. I'll also have a look on your website. Thanks for your help."

Boy, aged 13, Childline

Making decisions about next steps

Some children felt that they didn't know what to do and felt positive about confiding in a parent who could help make the decision about what to do next, such as informing the police.

"My boyfriend is 15 and he's been trying to force me to send nudes to him, but I haven't. He's controlling, manipulative and really toxic, but he wasn't this way when we first got together. He threatens bad things will happen to me if I don't send the pictures, or if I break up with him. I'd

like to break up with him, but I'm scared. I've told my friend, but she doesn't know what I should do. I will tell my mum tomorrow as I think she would really care about me. I imagine my mum will call the police and I like that idea."

Girl, aged 15, Childline

Children also discussed privacy-focused responses, such as their parents changing their privacy settings when they had experienced online harm.

"I have lots of worries in my head. I watched something I shouldn't have with my friends on grown-up YouTube. Afterwards I felt really guilty and know it was wrong. I know that I shouldn't speak to strangers online. My mum has put settings on so that I can't put comments on YouTube. It's annoying, but I know that my mum wants to keep me safe. I felt really nervous before our chat, but I'm pleased I called as I do feel better now."

Young person, aged 11, Childline

Removal of devices

Adults who contacted the NSPCC Helpline with concerns for a child in relation to online harm and safety discussed wanting advice to help support their child. Some adults, particularly parents, discussed tangible/practical responses, such as removing their children's devices to help keep them from harm.

"I've caught my 10-year-old son watching hardcore porn on his phone. I've seen his internet history and seen the photos he has saved. His

father and I have taken his phone from him and put more restrictions online. We'd like some advice on this please."

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

"I'm calling because I'm worried about my 12-year-old daughter, Freya. I took my daughter to her sports practice and noticed an older lad hanging around her and that he was adding her to Snapchat. I asked her to delete him and talked to her about the dangers of grooming and emphasised online safety. After another time at the sports practice, I noticed that he came up on her phone and she hadn't deleted him. I took her phone from her and found a really inappropriate sexual conversation. I will talk to the sports coach about it and to her school. I want to support her and want to share my concerns about this man, he and his friends are so much older than her."

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

However, some children did not react positively with their parents' or carers' response. Some felt as though they were being punished with their devices removed and being unable to see or contact their friends. Adults described young people being upset with the new restrictions. Some parents and carers described their child being teased or bullied at school because they couldn't access social media, apps, or games and losing daily "streaks"¹. Some also spoke about their child feeling "desperate to fit in with their friends" after removing (or threatening to remove) devices or access to platforms and accounts.

¹ Short for "Snapchat streak" or "Snapstreak". Some apps (like Snapchat), games and websites track, recognise and reward users for using them daily and/or completing tasks or activities daily. This can include interacting with, or sending messages and images to, other users.

“I’m feeling really down and needed someone to talk to. My dad is usually quite strict with me and limits what I can do. This makes me want to do things more. I shared some pictures of myself on Snapchat and my dad found them on my phone. He’s really angry with me. He’s taken my phone off me and replaced it with a basic “brick.” He’s also told me I can’t see my friend. The whole situation has made really upset and stressed. I broke down in school. I’m worried about what I’ve done and the impact it’s having on everyone.”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

“I work in a primary school and would like to discuss online safety. A mother in the school has spoken to me with concerns for her 10-year-old daughter, Amy, who has been contacted on Roblox by a person asking for her phone number. Amy has given out her number, and the person has sent her sexually explicit messages, including photos. The mother has confiscated her child’s phone. Amy will not talk to her mum about what has happened. The school have given regular internet safety messages, assemblies and lessons. Amy is upset and angry. The mother is worried and upset. I’d like advice to pass on.”

Professional, NSPCC Helpline

Some children told Childline counsellors that they understood why their device had been taken away.

“I’m freaking out about getting arrested by the police. I have been sending naked pictures to people online. I set up different accounts with different phones to do it. My mum found out when she heard me on the phone to someone she didn’t know and took my phones away. It has

happened before so my mum watches what I'm doing more. My mum has messaged the guys before telling them I'm only 12. I like being an adult and more mature. I like the attention, but I know that it's bad. I feel like I could do it again. I know that my mum was right for taking my phones away. I know she is only trying to keep me safe, and I understand that she doesn't trust me."

Girl, aged 12, Childline

Discussing "online relationships"

Parents and carers also discussed the balance required in keeping the communication open with their child, so that they can talk through what is going on, and the need to advise their child of the dangers of grooming.

"I'm worried about my 14-year-old daughter being groomed online. She's been talking to a 19-year-old guy. She confided in me that she has been talking to him online for about a month. I don't want to push her away as I'm worried that she will stop talking to me about this and hide it. I have had a conversation with my daughter about grooming and how to stay safe online. I'm looking for advice about what I should do."

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

Parents or carers and children can view "relationships" in different ways (NSPCC, 2024). Children and young people do not always recognise that they are being groomed and instead discuss their "relationship" or "friendship" with Childline counsellors, whilst parents and carers who contacted the NSPCC helpline had concerns for grooming.

“I’ve been having an online relationship with an older man who is in his thirties. My mum found out and has taken my phone and computer away. I’ve had anxiety for years and I just felt like this guy made me happy and feel good. I understand my mum’s reaction, but I really like this guy.”

Girl, aged 16, Childline

Some children felt as though what they had experienced was their fault and that they had let their parents or carers down. Children also discussed emotional responses, such as being shouted at by their parents.

“My number was added randomly to a group and someone was telling me to do weird things, otherwise they would leak my number. I spoke to my parents today, but now I feel upset, like I have let them down. My parents don’t really know how to help, but they said that they want to go to the police. I’m not sure how I feel about it as I’ve had bad experiences in the past with them. My school haven’t been very supportive. I cope by crying but I’m tired of feeling bad about myself. I feel better having a chat.”

Young person, aged 14, Childline

“I met a guy online who told me he was 15. We started having a relationship and I shared some inappropriate photos and messages with him. I’ve found out from the police that he isn’t actually 15. I’ve been experiencing panic attacks and flashbacks. My parents yelled at me a lot when they found out and I cried on the floor. I’m hoping I can talk to someone at school about it all.”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

Dealing with secretive online activity

Some parents or carers discussed finding out about online incidents and contacted the NSPCC Helpline for advice in the best course of action:

“I’m worried about my 16-year-old daughter who has been very secretive of her phone lately and is behaving out of character. She is constantly on her phone and plays an online game until very late at night. I have recently seen the messages that have been sent between her and the other users. I’m worried about what my daughter has shared as she has sent messages where she is worried about things being “leaked.” I will try to talk to her about her new online friends and find out what she has shared for her online safety.”

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

“I found deleted photos in my son’s camera-roll of his genitals. My son is 10 and I think he is talking to a 14-year-old boy who he knows and meets up with too. They message each other a lot, sometimes in the middle of the night. I think some of their messages might be in code. I think my son’s behaviour has changed lately. He has become withdrawn, wakes in the night and I have been told he has had panic attacks at school. I have contacted Children’s Services, but I’m not sure what else I should do.”

Parent, NSPCC Helpline

Responses from school

Children and young people who contacted Childline about their experiences of online harm had a range of experiences from their schools. This included the school being heavily involved in dealing with the online situation through liaising with parents and the police, delivering class assemblies about online safety and acting on any bullying associated with the online activities.

“I’m feeling anxious and very self-conscious. A few years ago, a video was leaked of me naked. The police became involved and stopped the video from circulating. My school tried to support me by giving a talk to the entire year group and informing them that anyone who distributes the video is committing a crime. My school also allowed me to do my classwork in a different place, until I was ready to gradually return to class. I started to get bullied about it, but the school put a stop to it. The whole incident had a big negative impact on me. I’ve been feeling anxious, self-conscious and triggered when people bring it up. I find it helpful to have reassurance and someone to speak to in helping me forget about what happened.”

Girl, aged 15, Childline

“I spoke to the school counsellor yesterday. I told them about sending nudes to a 17-year-old guy. The counsellor told me that they had to tell the safeguarding teacher and my mum. The school also emailed the guy’s school and they’re going to talk to a teacher there about it. I’m worried that the guy will find out that I reported him and stop talking to me. I didn’t expect the school to make such a big deal out of it. My mum was fine with me but upset that I hadn’t come to her myself. She’s said that I can’t see the guy anymore and keeps checking my phone.”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

Even when they received support and proactive responses from their school, some young people also shared concerns about stigma and emotional impact following their experiences of online harm.

“I’ve recently been harassed online by people from my school. They’ve been threatening me with sexual assault and violence. My friend noticed that a boy was being inappropriate to me and told a teacher. Then I let everything out. The school told the police and I’ve been talking to the police too. I felt really anxious about it, but they’ve been really nice. I feel like I’m annoying them though. I also feel like people will think I’m to blame and that I should have done more to stop it. The school have been supportive though and have split me up from the boys who were threatening me.”

Girl, aged 15, Childline

Unfortunately, some young people did not have the same experience, with some reporting that the school told them that there wasn’t anything they could do about an online situation, making the young person feel distressed and alone.

“I have an issue with a boy in my school. He is going to distribute a picture of a girl’s private parts and tell the whole school that it’s me, even though it isn’t. I’m really worried about going to school. My school have said they can’t do anything about it, so my mum is going to talk to them about it. I’m not sure if this is something I could go to the police about.”

Girl, secondary school age, Childline

Responses from the police

Children and young people who told Childline they experienced online harm had varying experiences of responses from the police. Some children discussed that the police were “really nice” to them and had positive experiences. There were descriptions of good communication and that the police liaised closely with their school and parents.

“I was groomed online years ago. The police were involved, and a couple of guys were jailed. The policewomen were kind and easy to talk to. I’m still supported by counsellors every month. It feels good to be able to talk about it.”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

“I was groomed online when I was younger and I’m still processing my feelings about it. I find it helpful to write things out when I feel stressed out. The police are still involved, and the person has been sentenced. I still meet with the police regularly, which is helpful.”

Young person, secondary school age, Childline

However, others experienced frustration when they were told, through other adults or directly by the police, that there were no actions that could be taken.

“My parents accessed my Snapchat account and found pictures and videos from a guy without his top on. They contacted the police, but they said there isn’t any concrete evidence about what happened.”

Girl, aged 16, Childline

Other children were concerned about getting in trouble with the police.

“My boyfriend recorded a video of us having sex. I said it was ok as long as it stayed private between us, but I found out yesterday he’s shared it with some of his mates! I thought I could trust him, but then he goes against me like that. I feel so betrayed. I worry this is gonna spread round school and everyone will be talking about me behind my back. I told my mum and older sister what happened, and they’ve been helping me to stay calm. My sis even rang my boyfriend on the phone and threatened to get the police involved if he didn’t sort this out. I’m grateful for her sticking up for me, but I really don’t want the police to know cos, like, what if I get in trouble?!”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

Responses from online platforms

Children come to Childline in times of worry, and children sometimes tell Childline about negative experiences with platforms, apps or sites or unresolved issues. This included incidents which had already been reported to a platform, but children wanted to know what else they could do, or where else they could report the incident. Furthermore, other children had reported an incident or account to a platform, but had not received a response yet, or wanted quicker action. Children also told Childline about incidents where they had reported their concerns to a platform but had not received the outcome that they wanted.

“I need your help – it’s really urgent! There’s currently an Instagram account of me and it has my nudes and I want it to be taken down as soon as possible! I’ve already reported it to Instagram more than 10

times now but it's not deleting. I don't know what else I can do. Please can you get it taken down because it's affecting my mental health"

Girl, aged 18, Childline

In some instances, the online platform provided the response that the young person wanted, such as removing an abusive account/content, which was causing them harm.

"I got scammed online by someone who was pretending to be a girl. I spoke to person on the phone and realised it was a man. I reported their account, and the social media site has taken it down."

Boy, aged 16, Childline

Children also told Childline in some instances that reporting made them feel better about an incident, particularly feeling more in control, less worried and less stressed.

"This girl added me on Instagram and then asked for my Snapchat. She was sending pictures of her naked and asked me to send some back. I know I shouldn't have done, but I was having a bad day and I thought that it might cheer me up. She then screenshotted my nudes and threatened to send them to my followers on Instagram if I didn't give her money. Obvs, I didn't pay her, and I reported her straight away. I still feel so embarrassed, and I hate myself for doing it, but I'm just glad I reported it because that has helped me a lot"

Boy, aged 18, Childline

Conclusion

When children and young people experience online harm, whether it is being harassed, viewing harmful content, receiving unwanted messages, being threatened, or having pictures and videos shared of them, it can be a challenging situation to navigate. Each situation will be unique, and it can be difficult to know the most appropriate response.

From contacts to our helplines, we are able to demonstrate that the responses which children and young people receive in relation to the online harm they experience vary greatly. Within this insight briefing, we have shared responses from peers, parents, the school and the police, and online platforms, when a young person has experienced online harm.

Some people were at a loss themselves at what the best course of action should be, especially as the online world, and the harms which take place in it, are ever-changing. Sometimes responses were emotional or punitive, including the young person being shouted at, being blamed for what happened or the parent was upset it hadn't been shared sooner. Others prioritised safety and privacy with reports made to apps, settings changed on accounts and having conversations about activities online to rebuild ideas of safety and trust.

What is clear from the voices of children, young people and adults speaking to our helplines is the mental and emotional impact of experiencing online harm, abuse and exploitation. Young people described for themselves their feelings of depression, stress, worry, distress, guilt and anxiety. Adults speaking to Helpline noticed changes to their child's behaviour, such as becoming withdrawn, having trouble sleeping, experiencing panic attacks, becoming worried, stressed and upset. It is evident that alongside any practical support a child receives for online harm, emotional support is also crucial.

Sometimes a response to an online safety issue was not always what the young person wanted, particularly if they did not view their situation as harmful. For example, having their phone removed, or being told to block a “friend” or “boyfriend/girlfriend” who was grooming them. Sometimes these actions resulted in young people finding ways to continue their online activity regardless and make efforts to further hide this from safe adults.

How to best support a young person who has experienced online harm is guided by a number of factors, such as the age and maturity of the child, agencies and the ever-developing options for reporting online harms, plus safety and security settings on different apps and platforms. Knowing what effective reporting or safety systems are in place is essential to tackle online harm quickly and prevent it from escalating; equally platforms, sites and apps should seek to continuously improve their safeguarding measures to protect young people online. We saw within contacts to Childline that young people will sometimes speak to peers first, suggesting that in online safety conversations young people also need to feel confident in what to do if a friend is experiencing harm online. The briefing has also highlighted good examples of multi-agency working, where agencies like schools and the police were able to work closely and effectively in safeguarding and supporting a young person.

When a child does feel able to share their experience, or it is discovered by an adult, they need to be met with supportive, age-appropriate and non-judgemental responses to help them cope with what has happened. When responding to a child who has reached out for support and is worried about what they have experienced, it is important to reaffirm that they have done the right thing in sharing, and to recognise that what has happened is not okay. For parents, professionals and the wider public who are worried about a child’s welfare our NSPCC Helpline is available to provide support and advice on safeguarding young people around online harms.

Childline provides support and information for all children and young people and our trained counsellors are here to listen. Childline is able to provide a space for young

people's worries to be listened to, provide emotional support and practical help for online safety concerns. Here is one of our trained counsellor's responses to a young person's email to Childline about their online issue:

“ I sent nudes to a 16-year-old on Snapchat. He told me that he would delete the pics, but he didn't. He's got multiple accounts. He's asked me to do other things online and then he'll delete them, but he hasn't. I don't want my family or school finding out about this as I'm very ashamed. I know it was my fault. I'm begging you to help me”

Girl, aged 14, Childline

Example response from Childline:

“ Hi,

“ Thanks for sharing what is happening in your life. I can hear how distressing it is for you at the moment regarding sending the nude photos to this person.

“ Images sent on sites like Snapchat can still be saved and screenshotted. It's not okay for someone to pressure you into sending a nude. Sending or receiving a nude when you're under 18 is against the law.

“ **We have a page on our website, 'Help! I've been asked to send a nude!'**. This has advice on what to do about sexting and sending nudes which will give you more information. **There is also a form you can fill in called 'Report Remove'**. This can get the images

taken down if they are posted publicly online. Choose your age group from the buttons at the bottom of the page to start the form.

- “ You can also report this to CEOP (Child exploitation and online protection). **Their website is CEOP Education and they have a section for your age group.**
- “ I can understand that you don't feel able to tell your family or school but what this person did to you was wrong and you deserve to be supported in dealing with it. You mentioned you are feeling ashamed, but it was not your fault. I wonder how it would feel having support from people who care about you?
- “ Remember if you are still struggling to cope with this, we are always here to listen
- “ Take care, a Childline Counsellor

+ Relevant Resources

- **Help! I've been asked to send a nude!**
<<https://www.childline.org.uk/get-involved/articles/help-ive-been-asked-to-send-a-nude/>>
- **Report Remove**
<<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/>>
- **CEOP Education**
<<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/>>

References

NSPCC (2024) **Why language matters: how referring to online 'friends' can mask safeguarding concerns**. [Accessed 18/06/2024].

< <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/why-language-matters/online-friends-can-mask-safeguarding-concerns>>

Methodology

When people contact the NSPCC Helpline or Childline, our trained professionals record what they tell us. The insights in this briefing are taken from those Helpline and Childline contacts where we recorded information about online harm or online sexual abuse and exploitation. Quotes are created from real Helpline and Childline contacts but all names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting the NSPCC.

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