INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Learning about online sexual harm

University of
Bedfordshire

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RESEARCH

THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
RESEARCHING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION,
VIOLENCE AND TRAFFICKING

November 2019

Learning about online sexual harm

Helen Beckett and Camille Warrington, with Jacqui Montgomery Devlin

Commissioned and undertaken on behalf of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

November 2019

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Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (the Inquiry),[1] as part of its investigation into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the internet. It was a small-scale, mixed-methods study which aimed to explore children's and young people's perspectives on:

- being online;

- risks of online sexual harm;

- education received about online sexual harm within state school settings;

- how such education could be improved; and

- what else should be done to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm.

Overarching themes from the research

Though a small scale study, the prioritisation of children's and young people's voices within it offers an important contribution to the existing underdeveloped research evidence base. The key themes from the research are presented below. These do not constitute formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and are separate from legal evidence obtained in investigations and hearings.

1. Listening to the views of children and young people is critical in ensuring the ongoing development of protective efforts are relevant and beneficial.
Children and young people want to talk about these issues and have an important contribution to make.
Those who took part in the research said they valued the opportunity to think about and discuss issues of online sexual harm, an opportunity many said they had not previously had.
Across all elements of the research, participants shared insightful contributions into their online lives and how they wanted to learn about, and be protected from, online sexual harm. Finding safe and appropriate ways to further elicit these views is critical if we are to ensure that protective efforts are relevant and beneficial for children and young people.
2. Children and young people need to be prepared for exposure to the risk of online sexual harm before they start spending time online.
The research clearly demonstrates that children and young people are likely to be exposed to risks of online sexual harm. Many interviewees and focus group participants described this as something that occurs on a regular basis and feels like a 'normal part' of online engagement.

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1   The Inquiry was established in 2015 to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions have taken seriously their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales. The Inquiry makes recommendations for change to help ensure that children are better protected from sexual abuse, both now and in the future.

Participants demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge about different forms and sources of online sexual harm. While there was considerable familiarity with potential dangers from adult strangers, there was limited understanding of the potential for harm from peers or others within their social networks. This suggests potential gaps in the messaging children and young people receive about online sexual harm, which affects their ability to identify potential sources of harm.

As participants highlighted, it is important that they are prepared for exposure to such risks in a timely manner. Given the increasingly young age at which children are spending time online, this research suggests a need to engage children and young people in conversations about online harm from primary school age.

3. Children and young people value the opportunities that being online offers, and find overly negative and avoidance-based messaging unhelpful.

Though recognising that harmful or distressing incidents could and did occur online, most participants' perspectives on spending time online were more positive than negative. Overly negative and avoidance-based messaging, which fails to acknowledge the positive aspects of being online, is seen as unhelpful and less relevant. Children and young people want to learn about online sexual harm in a proportionate and relevant manner.

4. Schools have a vital role to play in education about online sexual harm.

Participants identified a clear role for schools to play in education about online sexual harm, and have a myriad of suggestions as to how the delivery and content of such school-based education could be improved.

Their contributions highlight the need for schools to create a safe environment for learning. This includes the creation of safety in lessons and in the wider school environment, and adopting a zero tolerance approach to all forms of abuse.

Their responses also suggest that delivering education around online sexual harm needs to be recognised as a skilled endeavour. It should be afforded a stronger status within the curriculum, and those delivering it should be appropriately trained and supported.

Given evidence that there are likely to be pupils present who have experienced online sexual harm, it is important that due regard is given to messaging. This would include potential victim-blaming messages and how reporting and access to support can be better enabled.

5. Education about online sexual harm should do more to ensure children and young people do not believe responsibility for preventing online sexual harm lies with them.

Though recognising that parents and carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, the degree to which participants indicated they felt it was up to them to avoid sexual harm was a matter of concern.

Education (both school-based and otherwise) needs to balance messaging around self-protective actions with appropriate messages about where responsibility for preventing online sexual harm lies.

Participants' strong sense of responsibility for their own safety suggests this balance has not yet been achieved.

6. Families, industry and wider society need to play their part in tackling online sexual harm.

Participants recognise that school-based education is only one part of the larger response required to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm. Families, industry and wider society all have a role to play, and participants expressed a desire to see all such parties more actively engaged in efforts to tackle online sexual harm.

Methodology

The research involved three distinct data collection activities:

- *Surveys with 213 children and young people* (aged 10–18 years; 59 percent female and 41 percent male), undertaken in one primary and five secondary state school settings in England and Wales.

- *Focus groups with 45 young people* (aged 14–16 years; 67 percent female and 33 percent male), undertaken in three of the secondary state school settings.

- *Interviews with nine young people* (aged 13–20 years; eight females and one male) who had experienced online sexual harm when aged under 18 years, undertaken in six specialist services across England.

The research design was approved by ethics committees at the University of Bedfordshire and the Inquiry.

Being online

Participants' perceptions of spending time online were generally more positive than negative. While they recognised that harmful things can and do occur, they also emphasised the positive aspects of their online lives and wanted others to acknowledge these. This was also true for interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm, although they placed more emphasis on the risks associated with being online.

When asked about the negative aspects of being online, few survey participants explicitly identified the issue of online sexual harm. Their responses focused on more general online safety issues including bullying, hacking and scamming, as well as pressures associated with prevailing popularity and approval cultures.

Participants' contributions clearly reveal that spending time online means navigating the simultaneous presence of opportunity and enjoyment alongside pressure and harm, sexual or otherwise. While it was apparent that many had developed strategies to manage this, especially as they got older, participants expressed a desire for:

- action to be taken to reduce the pressures and risks young people face online;

- further support on how to identify and manage potential risks; and

- better understanding by adults of the realities of young people's online lives, and more relevant messaging around, and responses to, this.

Knowledge of online sexual harm

The vast majority of participants demonstrated some degree of knowledge of online sexual harm. Across all ages, school was identified as the most common source of learning. Family members, friends, peers and the media were also identified as significant sources of learning, although this varied slightly according to age. Of particular note is the fact that 9 percent of secondary school survey participants said they had learned about online sexual harm from personal experience.

Although participants were familiar with the concept of online sexual harm, their responses revealed a need and desire for better understanding about it. This included information about why it occurs, different forms it can take, how to identify it, possible impacts, and what to do if it happens.

Participants' contributions suggested some potentially critical gaps in knowledge and understanding about different forms of online sexual harm and related sources of risk. For example, while most secondary school aged participants identified sexual approaches from adult strangers as harmful, they demonstrated less clarity about what constituted sexual harm within the context of peer relationships or existing online networks. This included difficulties working out when online sexual activity between peers, including within relationships, was appropriate and when it constituted a form of online sexual harm. Participants explicitly wanted more support about this issue.

The issue of sexual images received considerable attention among interview and focus group participants. Many related personal experiences in which they, or others they knew, received unsolicited explicit sexual images, or requests or coercive messages to send such images to others. This was particularly apparent for female participants, a number of whom reflected on the 'normality' of this.

> *"I don't think my dad realises how many messages from random boys I get or how many dick pics I get. And I have to deal with it every day … it's kind of like a normal thing for girls now … I've been in conversations [online] like, 'Hi. Hi. Nudes?' I'm like, 'No' … yeah, it literally happens that quickly. Like, 'What's your age?' And you'll say how old you are, you're underage, and they'll be like, 'Oh OK', and then they'll ask for pictures."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

Participants reflected on how repeated exposure to such experiences could lead to desensitisation, which meant such incidents became accepted as an everyday part of life rather than something harmful to be acted on.

Both male and female participants highlighted how experiences of online sexual harm were influenced by wider harmful 'gender norms' and were part of a wider continuum of sexual harm. For boys and young men, these were noted to include myths around males not experiencing sexual harm, and an expectation that if it did occur, they should cope or 'laugh it off'. For girls and young women, impacts of gender norms included pressure to make sexual images of themselves available, and judgements that ensued whether they followed or resisted these expectations.

The significance of the online environment

Participants identified how the dynamics of online spaces presented young people with distinct risks compared with face-to-face interaction. Specific dynamics included the more anonymous nature of the internet, the disinhibition in online communication, and the global networked nature of possible unsolicited contact:

> *"If I saw a creepy man walking down the road, I'd walk the other way, while if a person messaged me, they had no profile picture and then they seemed normal, I'd engage in conversation because, you know, they seem normal, they don't look dangerous or harmful. So, it's like that, the way you see people, the way you view them, there's two different ways."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

A number of focus group participants and interviewees also identified specific protective aspects of the online environment. These included the potential ease, for some, of using 'blocking' or privacy settings in response to online sexual bullying or harassment. In other examples, online platforms were cited as a potentially helpful route to disclose experiences of harm and access support.

> *"You mostly end up telling them [friends] online – it's a lot easier to do it online because you don't have to see their face and you don't feel judged or you don't know if they're judging you. I told my friend online – it was a lot easier that way."*
>
> 13-year-old female interviewee

Whose responsibility?

Participants' responses indicated potential concerns in relation to the degree to which children and young people saw themselves as being responsible for preventing abuse occurring. Although participants recognised that parents, carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, their contributions repeatedly suggested that they felt it was ultimately their responsibility to keep themselves safe. This emphasis on personal responsibility holds significant implications for victims' feelings of guilt and self-blame, and blame from others. In addition, this belief was noted to inhibit the likelihood of children and young people seeking and receiving support in the event of experiencing abuse.

Provision of school-based education about online sexual harm

Nearly all participants thought that schools have an important role to play in educating children and young people about online sexual harm. However, some participants noted that they had not received such education, or had received it 'too late', after they had been exposed to or experienced online sexual harm. As one 14-year-old male interviewee who experienced online sexual harm observed:

> *"There's no point in learning about a situation after the situation has actually goddamned happened."*
>
> 14-year-old male interviewee

Participants emphasised the importance of schools educating children about online sexual harm before they start spending time on social media and other online platforms. Recognising the increasingly young age at which children may engage with social media, participants highlighted the importance of education about online sexual harm starting at primary school. They also noted the importance of school-based education being delivered on an ongoing basis, rather than as a one-off discrete input. Participants further expressed the need for education to consider the different learning styles and needs of pupils, and to use a range of engagement techniques, such as talks and videos, to meet these needs.

Participants identified a role for both schools and external organisations in delivering such education. This included bringing in those who had experienced such harm to talk about their experiences.

> *"By talking to people who have had those experiences it makes it a lot more real. I feel like by having other young people talking to you about it, they can connect on a more personal level than an older person who doesn't know the internet as well as a younger person."*
>
> 16-year-old female survey participant

Improving school-based education to address online sexual harm

The majority of participants who had received school-based education about online sexual harm said it had been helpful in some regards. At the same time, however, participants also questioned the usefulness and relevance of current approaches, noting significant room for improvement.

Improving content

Participants identified a need for school-based education to include:

1. *The diversity of ways in which online sexual harm occurs:* participants indicated that their education about online sexual harm, to date, had presented only a partial picture about the nature of risk, often focusing on stereotypical 'stranger danger' images of perpetrators and abuse. This meant they struggled to identify other types of online sexual harm. Participants specifically highlighted the need for education to discuss the potential for abuse from individuals known to children and young people, including peers, friends and intimate partners.

   > *"Obviously they can tell you, 'Don't talk to strangers, don't let strangers talk to you', and stuff, but they should also talk about people that you know and trust, or you think you trust, because they might be more of, you might be more of a target to them because they think you trust them."*
   >
   > 15-year-old female interviewee

2. *Potential harmful sexual behaviours by young people:* a number of participants observed how school-based education about online sexual harm needs to move beyond a focus on the behaviours of potential victims, to include consideration of young people's responsibility not to sexually harm others.

   > *"They always say, 'Don't send pictures because they might get spread', but the only problem with that is they never say to people, 'Don't spread them'."*
   >
   > 14–16-year-old-female focus group participant

3. *Links between online sexual harm and broader issues of sex, relationships and consent:* participants described engaging with a diverse range of challenges and potential risks online. This included sexual interactions that could be either appropriate or abusive, depending on the context. Focus group participants expressed a desire for more nuanced and reflective education that acknowledges their developing sexuality and helps them navigate what this means in the online environment. Participants also highlighted a desire for education to contextualise the issue of online sexual harm within discussions about broader forms of sexual harassment and abuse.

4. *The impact of online sexual harm:* there was a clear desire for education to explore the impact of online sexual harm, supporting children and young people to understand the potentially far-reaching practical and emotional consequences of abuse. This was particularly emphasised by interviewees with personal experiences of online sexual harm who wanted others to understand the impact that it can have.

5. *How to respond to, and report, concerns:* participants observed how some children and young people will encounter online sexual harm, regardless of efforts to prevent this. Given this, they noted the need for education to address what to do if online sexual harm occurs, including providing information about available resources, where to report it, and sources of support. Some participants also highlighted the need for education to address potential barriers to reporting, such as embarrassment, shame and fear of others' reactions, and a desire for help around how to deal with the emotional impact of abuse.

> *"I think that they should teach us about how we should deal with these sexual harm problems. Like they tell us about it, but not how to deal with these problems … "*
>
> *"And not just telling a teacher or a mate. Just tell us how to deal with it mentally."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participants

Improving tone and messaging

Participants repeatedly highlighted the limited effectiveness of overly negative or simplistic messaging, noting that such messages conflicted with the complex realities of their online lives. Participants' responses suggested that education needs to:

1. *Acknowledge the positives as well as the negatives of the internet:* there was a strong message from the majority of participants that education about online sexual harm needs to present risk proportionately. This means acknowledging the positive aspects of the internet alongside messaging about the potential risks. Participants emphasised the necessity of this for both educators' credibility and students' engagement with their messaging. As one 16-year-old female interviewee who had experienced online sexual harm explained:

> *"If you [teachers] sort of just come with the approach – 'this is bad' – then you just think – 'you don't understand so why should I listen?'"*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

2. *Consider the balance between informing and scaring:* The vast majority of participants highlighted the need for education to strike a balance between presenting the risks of online sexual harm and avoiding overly fearful or alarmist messaging. The one notable exception to this message came from some of the interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm. They advocated presenting 'worst-case scenarios' and evoking fear, noting this to be driven by a desire to protect others from experiencing what they had experienced.

> *"If they don't know, they won't know until it's too late. It can destroy your life."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

3. *Avoid simplistic avoidance-based messaging:* Participants expressed a need for education to go beyond the directive, avoidance-based messages that had been typical of their experiences of online sexual harm education. They remarked on the limited effectiveness, and sometimes counter-productivity, of messaging that simply told people to do or not do something. This includes advice such as '*increase your privacy settings*', '*avoid communication with "strangers" online*' or '*avoid sending any messages of a sexual nature*'.

> *"If you just get taught never talk to anyone on the internet, stay off it, you just think, 'Oh well, I'm going to ignore that', and then you don't actually know what the warning signs are, which means you go on thinking that there's not real risk and everyone's making it up."*

14–16-year-old male focus group participant

Focus group and interview participants further observed that such messages sat uncomfortably with other pressures and their aspirations for popularity, status and belonging, and therefore felt unrealistic to follow.

> *"With school and stuff, people say, 'Have your account on private', but then, it's all about likes and followers and views nowadays ... if your account's on private, then only the people that follow you can like your things ... people don't really follow the privacy rules because then it don't really benefit them in lots of ways."*

16-year-old female interviewee

Improving delivery style

Participants indicated that they valued and wanted education which provides opportunities for discussion and reflection, enabling two-way dialogue, as opposed to more didactic teaching styles. They noted the importance of creating an atmosphere that fosters openness and enables pupils to ask questions that might otherwise be difficult or embarrassing. They also emphasised benefits from recognising and integrating pupils' experiences and expertise, and involving them in setting the learning agenda. Such approaches were noted to both enhance educators' understanding of the realities of children's and young people's online lives, and make education more engaging for pupils.

Enhancing online safety: non-school-based interventions

Although the research primarily focused on school-based education, participants were also asked what else they thought could be done to help protect children and young people from online sexual harm. Participants recognised that tackling online sexual harm requires action not just by schools, but on many fronts.

1. *The role of parents and carers:* participants identified an important role for parents and carers in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, but recognised they needed access to better information and support to do this.

   > *"I think as well as teaching young people about online safety they should actually teach young adults, adults [and] parents, because then they can warn their own children about it. Because honestly, I wish that my mum and dad spoke to me about it, and it would have saved me a lot of stress."*

   16-year-old female interviewee

   Participants recognised that the ability to have these conversations was not just dependent on parents' knowledge, but also on the nature of parent-child relationships.

There were differing views on the legitimacy of parental monitoring and control, in light of the importance of children's and young people's privacy and independence. Achieving an appropriate balance between these concerns was recognised to be difficult and context-specific, dependent on factors such as the age of the child and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

2. *The role of the online industry:* participants identified a clear role for the online industry to play in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, suggesting that these responsibilities were not currently being fulfilled.

> *"I think they [online companies] have a major responsibility, and they don't do it, they don't think about it at all. On Instagram, I've seen no posts about safety."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

Participants identified a series of actions that those responsible for online platforms could take to enhance the safety of children and young people who used them. These included both 'designing out' risk through better privacy controls, and 'designing in' protective functions through better monitoring and reporting options. Suggestions included:

- embedding warnings and advice for users to read when signing up to social media platforms or other apps;

- improving enforcement of age restrictions;

- improving privacy settings, including the use of default privacy settings when setting up an account; and

- enhanced moderation, more accessible reporting options, and stronger action when concerns are reported.

3. *The need for societal change:* participants identified a range of ways in which their online experiences, including exposure to sexual harm, were negatively influenced by norms and pressures in society. While having fewer concrete suggestions as to how these could be addressed, participants did note the importance of wider society, including the media and celebrity culture, taking an active role to tackle them. The two main issues identified at this broader societal level were:

- harmful gender norms, and the associated normalisation of sexual violence. These were observed to influence both the risk of, and responses to, online sexual harm; and

- the undue influence of the media, celebrity culture and an online 'approval culture'. These were observed to make children and young people less likely to use privacy settings, thus increasing their potential exposure to individuals who may sexually harm them.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 The research

This research study focused on eliciting children's and young people's views on online-facilitated child sexual abuse, particularly their views on the education they have received, or would like to receive, about this subject within state school settings. The specific research objectives were to explore children's and young people's perspectives on:

- being online;

- risks of online sexual harm;[2]

- education received about online sexual harm within state school settings;

- how such education could be improved; and

- what else could be done to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm.

The research did not seek to elicit the views of parents, school staff or those delivering education programmes, or to evaluate the effectiveness of such programmes. The focus was solely on children and young people's perspectives.

Contributions were elicited from both general populations of school-aged children and young people, using school-based surveys and focus groups, and from those with known experience of online-facilitated child sexual abuse, through individual interviews.

1.2 The Inquiry

The research was commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (the Inquiry). The Inquiry was established in 2015 to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions have taken seriously their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales. The Inquiry makes recommendations for change to help ensure that children are better protected from sexual abuse, both now and in the future.

The Inquiry commissioned this research study to provide further context to their investigation into institutional responses to child sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by the internet (the internet investigation). The research follows the publication of three rapid evidence assessments, commissioned by the Inquiry: *Characteristics and Vulnerabilities of Victims of Online-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation* (May-Chahal et al., 2018); *Behaviour and Characteristics of Perpetrators of Online-facilitated Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation* (DeMarco et al., 2018); and *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Quantifying the Extent of Online-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse* (Wager et al., 2018).

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2   As outlined further in section 1.4, the simpler language of 'online sexual harm' (rather than 'online-facilitated child sexual abuse') was adopted, as the research was being undertaken with children and young people.

1.3 The research team

The research was completed by staff from the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking (the International Centre) at the University of Bedfordshire. The International Centre has extensive experience of undertaking research with children and young people around issues of sexual abuse and related experiences and vulnerabilities. As an applied research centre focusing on abuse, the International Centre has developed extensive specialist understanding of safe and ethical trauma-informed approaches to data collection on sensitive issues. This includes work with children and young people who are known to have experienced trauma and abuse, and work with general populations whose exposure to such issues is unknown (as in the school-based elements of this study).

1.4 Defining online-facilitated child sexual abuse

Online-facilitated child sexual abuse is difficult to define due to its dynamic and changing nature and the use of different classifications in different jurisdictions (Wager et al., 2018). The Inquiry's definition of online-facilitated child sexual abuse, which underpinned this study, includes:

> *online grooming and receiving sexual requests; being exposed to pornography; some sexting activities; online-facilitated child sexual exploitation (eg offering gifts, money or affection in return for sexual activities taking place or orchestrated online, but enacted during an offline meeting with the perpetrator or others); engaging with online images of child sexual abuse (including searching, viewing, downloading, exchanging, producing and commissioning of indecent images).*

It is important to recognise that the term covers a number of distinct but related abusive actions and behaviours. Online-facilitated child sexual abuse can take a variety of forms in both the online and offline environment, and is perpetrated by individuals with varying motivations and using varying mechanisms (see DeMarco et al., 2018, for further details). It includes both contact abuse and non-contact abuse. Potential perpetrators include: people known and unknown to a victim; males and females; and people operating alone or as part of a group. Peers can present a source of risk, as well as older children or adults, although as noted by May-Chahal et al. (2018), there is a lack of definitional clarity in such circumstances. Such confusion is particularly acute when the abuse occurs within the context of 'sexting' or as part of self-generated content and images.

The sexual abuse may constitute a one-off act or recurring pattern of behaviour. It may be linked to other forms of abuse, such as emotional or physical abuse, or take place in contexts such as intimate partner violence. The multiple and diverse forms and contexts of online-facilitated child sexual abuse – and the challenges these can present in understanding, educating about and responding to this type of abuse – is important context to this study.

It is important, at this point, to highlight the alternative terminology used within this research. Although the original research tender used the term 'online-facilitated child sexual abuse', the Inquiry gave permission for the alternative phrasing of 'online sexual harm' to be used within the research. This was so the language and concept was more accessible and appropriate for the children and young people taking part in the research.

The use of the phrase 'online sexual harm' was informed by a recognition that children's and young people's interpretations of the word 'abuse' are often more restricted than those underpinning the study. In addition, it was considered important to ensure that the definition used did not exclude potential manifestations of online-facilitated child sexual abuse that children and young people might not recognise as such. Sexual harm was therefore broadly defined as 'anything sexual that is abusive or makes you feel upset or uncomfortable'[3] (see Chapter 2, section 2.2, for other definitions used within the study).

The phrase 'online sexual harm' was used with participants throughout the research in information materials, surveys, interviews and focus groups, and this report uses the same expression.

1.5 The existing knowledge base

Both online-facilitated child sexual abuse specifically, and children's and young people's online experiences more broadly, are relatively new and evolving areas of research. Existing research in the area is consequently limited, particularly that which draws directly on children's and young people's perspectives and focuses on education and learning.

The following section provides some key learning points from the existing knowledge base, as context for this study. As the study did not include a formal literature review, this should not be viewed as a comprehensive overview, but rather as a means of situating this research within and alongside a number of key studies and recent policy changes, and signposting to further reading.

1.5.1 Scale of online-facilitated child sexual abuse

As highlighted in the Inquiry's *Rapid Evidence Assessment: Quantifying the Extent of Online-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse* (Wager et al., 2018), quantifying the extent of online-facilitated child sexual abuse remains challenging. This is due to both its global nature and the limitations of relying on crime data as a means of identifying victims. Within England and Wales, for example, online-facilitated child sexual abuse is captured across a range of different offences. These include: sexual grooming offences; sexual communication with a child; causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity; causing or inciting the sexual exploitation of a child. In addition, crime figures recorded by police are not collected on a national basis, and guidance warns against relying on them to reflect the frequency of a recorded crime ('prevalence'). Observations of high levels of under-reporting in relation to both sexual abuse more generally (see, for example, Radford et al., 2011) and online-facilitated sexual abuse specifically (see, for example, Palmer, 2015) indicate that crime figures reflect a substantial under-representation of all incidents of online-facilitated child sexual abuse.

Given these limitations, all prevalence figures should be treated with caution. Recognising this, some figures of relevance to the study are outlined below.

- In the year to September 2018, police forces in England and Wales recorded over 9,000 sexual offences against children with an online element (accounting for 16 percent of the total recorded child sexual offences) (NSPCC, 2019).

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3   This is in line with the broad definition of child sexual abuse contained within statutory guidance, which includes any sexual activity that is forced or enticed.

- The National Crime Agency identified around 80,000 individuals in the last five years who presented a sexual threat to children online (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2018).

- In 2018, the Internet Watch Foundation received 229,328 reports concerning child sexual abuse images globally, covering 105,047 unique web addresses (URLs) (Internet Watch Foundation, 2019).

Across all existing datasets, including self-reports, there are higher numbers of reported incidents involving female victims than male victims of online-facilitated child sexual abuse, in keeping with what is known about broader forms of child sexual abuse (Radford et al., 2011). However, it is also important to consider particular barriers to the identification and reporting of child sexual abuse experienced by males, which may affect the proportions reflected within these figures (McNaughton Nicholls et al., 2014).

1.5.2 Perpetrators of online-facilitated child sexual abuse

The rapid evidence assessment on perpetrators, commissioned by the Inquiry, identified a lack of research specifically on the profile of perpetrators of online-facilitated child sexual abuse (DeMarco et al., 2018). The assessment observed that the studies that do exist suggest that perpetrators are predominantly men from a white or European background, with less likelihood of criminal histories and previous convictions of any type than contact offenders. The research was inconclusive on the link between online-only offending and further offline offending. Importantly for this research, it found that social networks were the most common platform used for online-facilitated child sexual abuse (DeMarco et al., 2018).

1.5.3 Children's and young people's online experiences

A number of pieces of recent research have addressed broader questions about children's and young people's online experiences. Some of the key points emerging from this literature, of particular relevance to this research, are noted below.

- Adolescents are among the highest consumers of social media (UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 2018).

- Children greatly appreciate the ability to engage in networked experiences online, including opportunities for self-expression, belonging and participation (Livingstone et al., 2018).

- Children value their privacy and engage in a range of protective strategies online. However, their decisions and practices relating to online safety are also influenced by the wider social environment (Ofcom, 2017).

- Children's most commonly cited concerns about being online relate to pornographic or sexual content (Livingstone et al., 2013).

- Not all children are equally able to navigate the digital environment safely. Their diverse experiences, competencies and capacities will affect their engagement with privacy online (Livingstone et al., 2018).

- The impact of offline abuse in intimate relationships – including sexual violence – is compounded by activity in online environments. The dynamics of online spaces provide new opportunities for young people to both experience and perpetrate control and surveillance in intimate partnerships (Aghtaie et al., 2018).

In terms of educating children about online harm, two key points emerge.

- 'Almost all' children (aged 8–15 years) have accessed some form of online safety education. A study found that 95 percent of a sample of 1,430 children recalled being told about how to use the internet safely, with this advice most likely to have come from a parent or teacher (Ofcom, 2017).

- Education addressing online safety needs to avoid over-simplified messages about children's online behaviours, recognising diversity within and between groups of children. For education about online safety to be effective, it needs to situate information about dangers and potential risks in the context of the wider benefits of the internet. Further, it should avoid the use of restrictive parenting or educational approaches that suppress the potential for children's skills development (Livingstone et al., 2018).

1.5.4 Schools' roles in addressing online-facilitated child sexual abuse

In 2017, the Children's Commissioner for England indicated that the potential role of schools in preventing child sexual abuse, including online-facilitated abuse, is not yet being fulfilled (Children's Commissioner for England, 2017).

Some commentators have suggested that the role of schools in addressing online-facilitated child sexual abuse has lacked consistency, and that guidance has allowed for variable interpretation and application of the existing curriculum (Green, 2019). They note that although the national curriculum requires schools to teach online safety, there is limited clarity about the integration of sex and relationships education within this (Green, 2019). The diversity of school settings and governance arrangements has also been noted to affect the consistency of the status and delivery of sex and relationships education (Brook et al., 2014; Ofsted, 2013).

There are a range of resources and preventative programmes available for schools that deliver education about online-facilitated sexual abuse. These include resources aimed at reducing online harm more broadly (see, for example, resources from Childnet International) and those with a more targeted approach to online-facilitated sexual abuse (see, for example, _ThinkUKnow_ from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection command). In addition, schools have access to a government-commissioned online safety guide for those working with children, developed by the UK Council for Child Internet Safety. This sets out the knowledge and skills children need to 'stay safe' online. However, despite the range of initiatives in use, little is known about the impact of education on online safety, including that relating to sexual forms of abuse. This research seeks to contribute to addressing this gap.

In June 2019, during the course of this research, the Department for Education published new guidance on teaching online safety in schools (DfE, 2019). This follows the requirement that from September 2020, relationships education for primary pupils and relationships and sex education for secondary pupils will be compulsory in all state-funded schools in England, along with compulsory health education. Online safety will be a mandated element of these new subjects.

The new guidance[4] details specific topics for inclusion in the curriculum and ideas about how these align with existing subjects. It also encourages schools to consider children who may have particular characteristics or needs that could make them more vulnerable to online harm, and to tailor provision to support all pupils. Attention is also given to ensuring the curriculum is delivered and managed safely, specifically considering children who have experienced online abuse. The guidance further recommends that for teaching about online safety and harm to be effective, it must extend beyond the classroom and become embedded within the wider school culture and practice.

1.6 Report structure

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents the research methodology. It includes a reflection on ethics and limitations, and an overview of the research sample. Chapters 3–7 present the findings from the research.

Chapter 3 begins with an exploration of participants' experiences of spending time online. It considers time spent online, what participants do online, and what participants like and do not like about being online. It also explores the degree to which participants think adults understand the realities of their online lives.

Chapter 4 explores participants' familiarity with the concept of online sexual harm, considering the degree to which they have learned about this, and through which sources. It also considers contextual factors that participants identified as affecting their exposure to online sexual harm.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine school-based education about online sexual harm. Chapter 5 focuses on whether, how and when participants received such education and how they would like to do so. Chapter 6 considers participants' reflections on the relevance and helpfulness of the education they have received, exploring their suggestions on how the content, messaging and approach could be improved.

Chapter 7 broadens the focus beyond school-based education to consider participants' contributions about what else they think needs to be done to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm. In line with their recommendations, it explores the role that parents and carers, industry, and wider society can play to combat online sexual harm.

Chapter 8 offers some concluding thoughts on the conduct of, and learning from, the research. It draws out the overarching themes from across the different elements of the research and considers the potential implications of what the research found.

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4   This guidance is due to be further reviewed before September 2020.

CHAPTER 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research methods used within this multi-method study, the rationale for their use, and the participants engaged through each method. It also reflects on the ethical and practical challenges of undertaking the work and shares some reflections on the limitations of the research. The chapter concludes with some important contextual commentary about how to interpret the data presented in the research findings.

2.2 Methods

Three distinct, but complementary, research methods were used to elicit children's and young people's perspectives within this mixed-methods research project. Surveys provided access to a breadth of perspectives across a range of descriptive and attitudinal questions. Focus groups and interviews were used to explore more nuanced or sensitive concepts and to obtain more in-depth reflections from a smaller number of participants. More information on each of these follows below.

Research instruments and supporting information materials were designed and piloted with the International Centre's Young Researchers Advisory Panel. The surveys were further piloted with a group of young people (the secondary school survey) and teachers (the primary school survey) and amended in light of their helpful observations.

As noted in Chapter 1, the term 'online sexual harm' (as opposed to the more complex 'online-facilitated child sexual abuse') was used with participants. Definitions of what was meant by 'being online', 'online harm' (primary school) and 'online sexual harm' (secondary school), as outlined below, were shared at the start of engagements with participants. This sought to ensure that participants responded to questions with a shared conceptual understanding.

Project definitions

Being online: doing anything that involves the internet (supported with examples of the range of activities that this could entail, such as gaming, watching YouTube, searching the web, being in chatrooms or using Snapchat or Instagram).

Online harm (used with primary school survey participants): things that happen online that make you feel uncomfortable, worried or upset.

Sexual harm: anything sexual that is abusive or makes you feel upset or uncomfortable.

Online sexual harm: sexual harm on the internet, including (a) experiences of sexual harm that happen online, such as messages, images and videos, and (b) online contact that leads to face-to-face sexual harm.

2.2.1 Surveys

Two different surveys[5] were used within the research: one for secondary school participants (aged 11–18 years), and one for primary school participants (aged 10–11 years). Both contained a mix of open and closed questions about:

- participants' experiences of being online;

- their knowledge of online sexual harm;

- the school-based education they have received about this;

- the helpfulness of such education;

- the education they think children and young people should receive about such issues; and

- what else they think needs to be done to protect children and young people from online harm.

These topics reflected the issues the Inquiry wished to learn about through the research, and reflected identified gaps in the current body of research literature.

The primary school survey was adapted from the secondary school survey but designed to be more appropriate and accessible for younger participants. It was shorter, simpler and contained fewer open-ended questions. It was also less direct in how it addressed online sexual harm, in order to avoid confronting participants with unfamiliar concepts. While the secondary school survey solely and explicitly focused on online sexual harm, the primary school survey focused on online harm more generally, with examples of online sexual harm included at appropriate points.[6]

In order to ensure participants understood what they were being asked to take part in, and to ensure appropriate wrap-around support was provided, surveys were only administered through researcher-led sessions in school settings. Sessions were run during the school day and lasted 35–60 minutes, depending on the school timetable.

Each session began with a short informal introductory talk by the researchers, which covered:

- the purpose of the research;

- what participants were being asked to do;

- how their answers would be used;

- definitions;

- the importance of choice, in terms of whether or not to take part, what questions to answer, and being able to stop at any point and change their mind; and

- support available, both during and after the session.

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5   Copies of the surveys and other research materials are available from the researchers on request.

6   The language used in the primary school survey was informed by the Key Stage 2 (up to 11 years) online safety curriculum, and resources designed by the NSPCC ('Share Aware') and CEOP ('Thinkuknow').

Participants were actively encouraged to ask questions, and consent to participate was checked and formally recorded at the start of the survey. Participants were then given access to the survey, either online or in paper copy,[7] and asked to complete it without conferring with others. The researchers remained in the room, in order to answer questions and provide assistance if needed. The session ended with participants being thanked for their involvement and advised, verbally and in writing, about their right to change their mind, how to access support, and how they would receive feedback about the research.

A total of 18 survey sessions were run across six different state schools. While the number of schools that could be involved was limited by the small-scale nature of the research and the short timeframes within which fieldwork had to be conducted, the school sample was selected to provide diversity in terms of:

- covering England and Wales;

- including rural and urban settings;

- spanning primary and secondary-level provision; and

- including different types of school.

One primary school, two alternative education provisions and three mainstream secondary schools[8] (one with sixth form provision) took part. The schools were located in different regions of England and Wales.

The classes that were invited to participate were selected by schools according to preferred age ranges provided by the researchers.[9] Participation was dependent on the provision of parental consent, and on participants' own interest in and consent to participate.

A total of 213 children and young people participated in the survey element of the research: 39 children (aged 10–11 years) completed the primary school survey; 174 (aged 11–18 years) completed the secondary school survey.

Across the survey sample:

- Fifty-nine percent were female and 41 percent male.[10]

- Twenty-five percent were aged 10–11 years, 56 percent 12–15 years, and 19 percent 16–18 years.

- Sixty-four percent identified as white, 14 percent Asian, 10 percent black, 10 percent mixed heritage and 2 percent other.

- Seven percent reported having a learning disability, and 2 percent a physical disability.

Figure 2.1 shows the age and sex of survey participants.

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7   In most schools, both options were available to pupils, the vast majority of whom chose the online option. However, one secondary school could only facilitate use of hard copy surveys, and IT issues in the first session in the primary school meant paper copies had to be used.

8   One of these was a (Catholic) faith-based school.

9   Different schools were asked to involve different year groups to try to maximise age variation across the sample.

10 Missing cases excluded.

Figure 2.1: Age and sex of survey participants
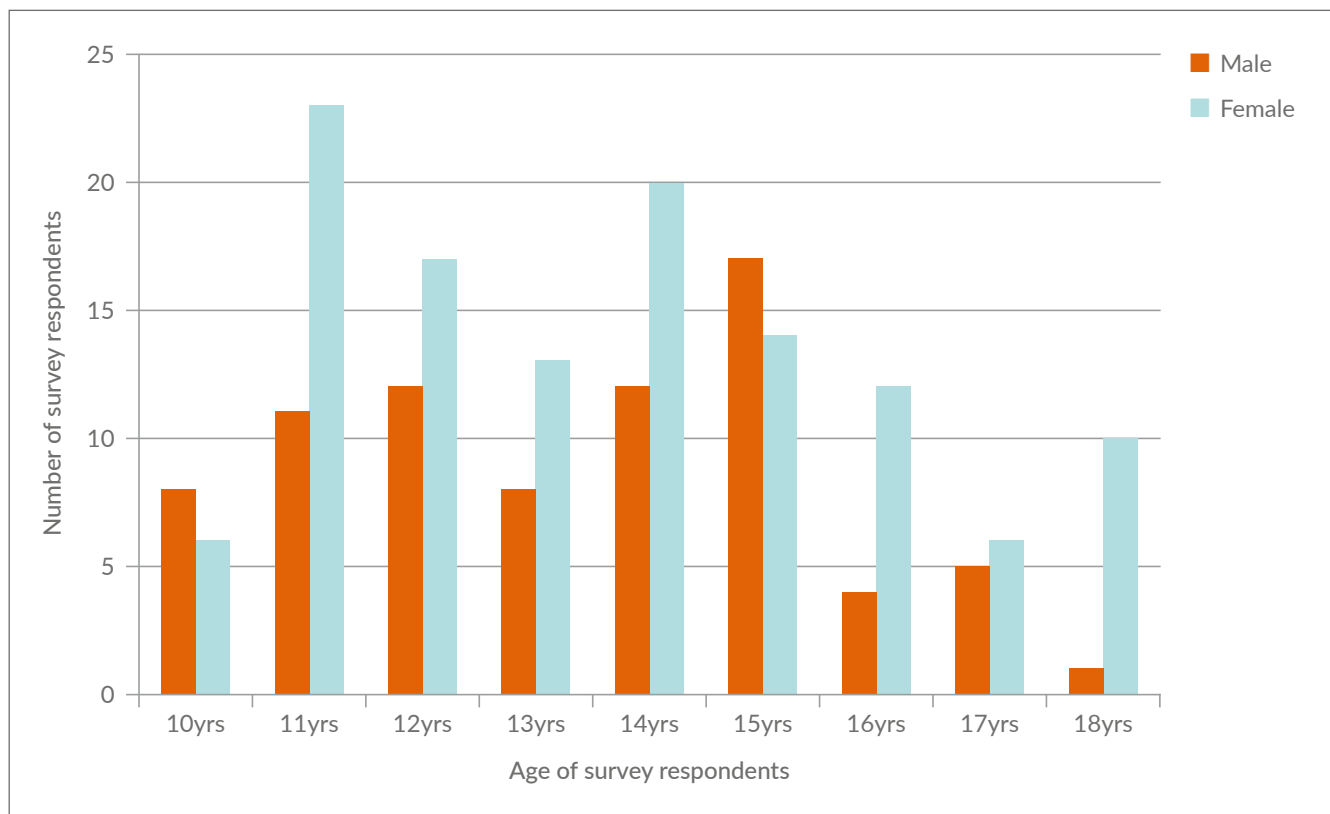
2.2.2 Focus groups

Focus group discussions were used to have more in-depth conversations about young people's perceptions of their online lives and associated sexual risks and harm. Participants were also asked to consider potential differences in adults' and young people's perspectives around online sexual harm and the implications of this for education.

Focus groups were run in school settings during the school day, for reasons of accessibility and support. Like the surveys, focus groups began with a short introduction to the research (covering the same elements listed above) and consideration of any associated questions or concerns. Participants' contributions were audio-recorded when the whole group consented to this, but where anyone expressed a preference against this, hand-written notes were taken instead.[11]

Alongside facilitated discussion, the focus groups used two interactive exercises designed to promote engagement with the topic.

- Voting with your feet: moving along a continuum from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly' in response to statements, and discussing reasons for chosen position

- A ranking exercise: classifying types of online sexual activity on a matrix according to whether they were judged 'OK', 'harmful' or 'context dependent'.

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11   All participants were given a choice as to whether the researchers should audio-record or use written notes. This was recorded in writing so participants did not have to express their preferences in front of others. Four groups were audio-recorded; two were recorded in hand-written notes in response to participants' preferences.

These exercises elicited high levels of conversation, reflection and debate, and could easily have continued had more time been available, revealing a clear appetite among young people for discussing these issues when offered safe opportunities to do so. Focus groups ended with participants individually writing their thoughts on how education about online sexual harm could be made more relevant, and a short wrap-up by the researchers, as per the survey sessions.

Six groups were conducted across the three mainstream secondary schools that had facilitated the survey element of the research. Given the group-based nature of the engagement, and the topic being discussed, a minimum age of 14 years was set. Schools were asked to set up single-sex sessions, and five such groups were run – three female and two male. One mixed-sex focus group was run at the request of a school which, on the basis that this was an existing group, felt the mixed-sex nature would not inhibit discussions. This proved to be the case.

The focus groups lasted 40–60 minutes, depending on school timetabling, and each involved between four and nine participants. Potential participants were selected by schools, and as such were not a random sample of pupils. A total of 45 children, all aged 14–16 years, participated in focus groups:

- Thirty-three percent were male, and 67 percent female.

- Forty-six percent were aged 14 years, 43 percent 15 years, and 11 percent 16 years.

- There was less ethnic diversity within the focus group participant sample, with 90 percent describing themselves as white, 5 percent mixed heritage, 2 per cent black, and 2 percent as Asian.

- No focus group participants reported having a physical disability; one reported having a learning disability.

2.2.3 Individual interviews

This element of the research was specifically focused on engaging those with known experiences of online sexual harm. It was not designed to explore participants' actual experiences of such harm, but instead to elicit their experience-based perspectives on the risks children and young people face online, the relevance of current education around online sexual harm, and how we can better protect children and young people from such harm.

All participants were accessed through specialist agencies who could appropriately support their involvement in the research. Risk and needs assessments were completed in advance of involving participants, and specific approaches to interviewing devised accordingly. Proactive wrap-around support was provided by the facilitating agencies, who were funded to deliver this.

It is worth noting that the interview element of the work was particularly difficult to organise, indeed much more so than has previously been the case in other similar research. Fifty-two services were directly approached about supporting the interview element of the research, in addition to approaches to two major children's charities' national networks of services. Only six services ended up supporting young people to be involved in interviews, despite many more expressing a desire to do so. The two main reasons for this were capacity issues within services and a lack of young people meeting the criteria for involvement in the research.[12]

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12   The main (exclusion) criterion that ruled out potential participants was involvement in a live investigation.

Interviews lasted 40–90 minutes, depending on how long participants wished to engage for. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning the same general areas were covered but not always in the same order or exactly the same language. All participants had the option to reflect on questions from a broad rather than a personal perspective, allowing them to share their experience-informed perspectives without having to also share details of their own experiences of harm. This was not intended to prevent participants from speaking directly about their own experiences – indeed, seven of the nine interviewees did so as the interview progressed – but to ensure that this was a choice rather than an expectation.

In order to further maximise participants' control, young people taking part in interviews were given choices about when interviews took place, whether they had a supporter present, how long they wanted to meet for, what they discussed and how their contributions were recorded (via audio recorder or hand-written notes[13]).

As with the other elements of the project, interviews began with an overview of the research and the young person's potential involvement in it, discussion of any questions or concerns, and confirmation of consent. Interviews ended with an opportunity for participants to identify anything else they thought it would be good for us to know, and a general discussion to withdraw from the intensity of the interview. The conclusion of the interview also involved checking consent for young people's contributions to be used[14] and a discussion about support and what happens next.

Nine young people with known experiences of online sexual harm participated in individual interviews. One was male, and eight were female. They were aged 13–20 years, and all had experienced online sexual harm while aged under 18 years.[15]

Figure 2.2 shows the age and sex of interview participants.

2.3 Analysis

The qualitative data that emerged from interviews and focus groups, and the more in-depth qualitative responses to free-text survey questions, were subject to thematic analysis, using the computer package NVivo. The framework for this analysis was initially created using the interview and focus group schedules, but in line with an inductive approach to analysis, additional categorisations were created to reflect emerging themes within the data.

Survey data were imported into the software package SPSS and subjected to data cleaning and additional categorisations, such as age bandings, to support descriptive analysis. Categorisations were also applied to text-based answers to open-ended questions, in order to enable commentary on the relative frequency with which themes appeared within these answers. This is described in the report as high-level coding. Given the differing questions within the surveys, primary school survey responses and secondary school survey responses were treated as two distinct datasets and separately analysed.

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13   Five interviews were audio-recorded, and four were recorded in written note form.

14   As part of this, we proactively checked if there was anything participants had shared that they would rather we did not use, and removed any contributions identified as such. Participants were advised this would happen at the start of the interview so they had the 'safety net' of knowing that just because they said something, it did not mean they could not withdraw it. They were also able to withdraw contributions within two weeks of participating, and advised how to do this.

15   Further demographic information was not collected on interviewees.

Figure 2.2: Age and sex of interview participants
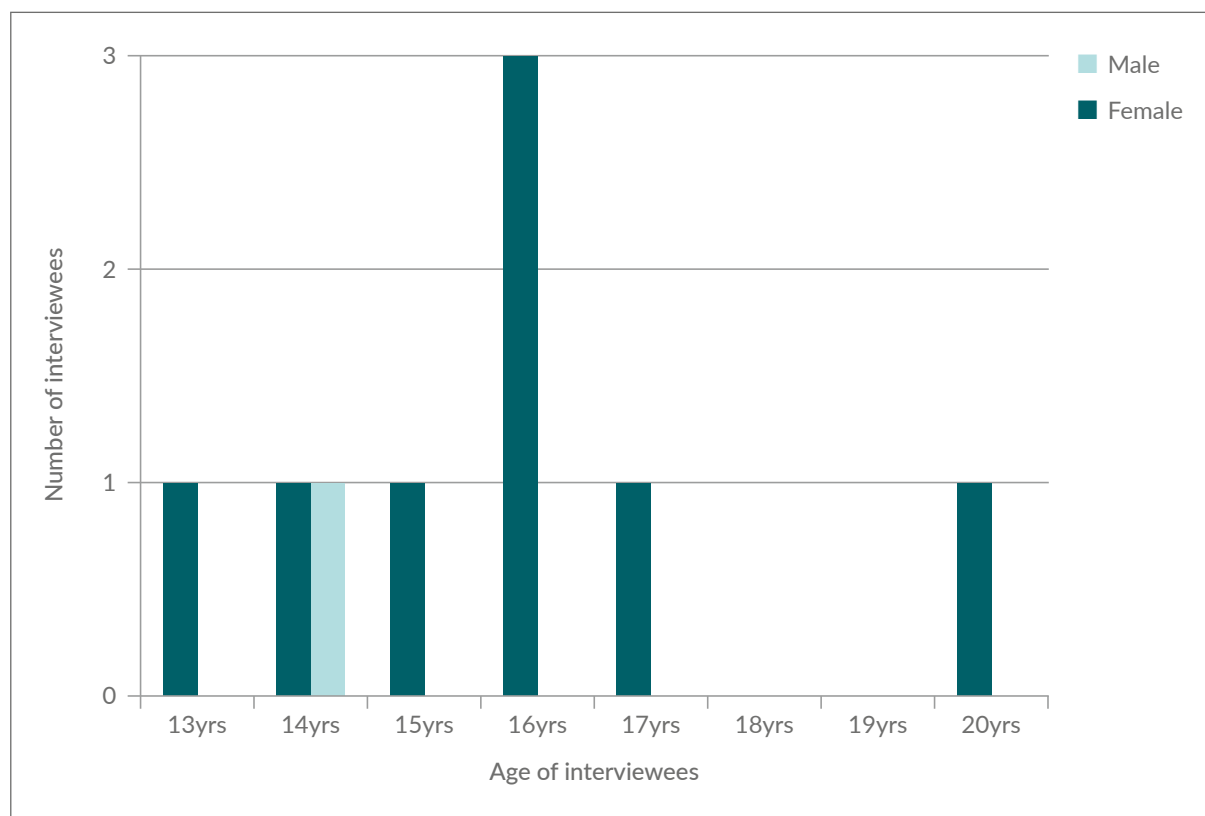
2.4 Ethics

Our overriding methodological and ethical concern was to ensure a rights-informed and rights-respecting approach that prioritised the safety and wellbeing of all involved in the research process. A project such as this entails many ethical considerations, including those relating to safeguarding, welfare, participation and representation. In recognition of this, and in line with all work undertaken by the research team, ethics was viewed as an ongoing reflective concern, not just a discrete procedural requirement.

All necessary procedural approvals were obtained prior to the commencement of any fieldwork. This included approvals from the Inquiry's Research Ethics Committee, the University of Bedfordshire's Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Panel and the ethics committees of the voluntary sector organisations which supported young people's involvement in individual interviews.

A copy of our project ethical statement can be provided upon request. Key principles that underpinned this were:

- taking active steps to maximise benefit and minimise risk for participants and those facilitating their participation;

- a commitment to meaningful informed consent, through transparent accessible written materials and follow-up verbal explanations prior to confirmation of consent, and options to rescind consent;[16]

- maximising participant choice and control around whether and how they engaged, and how their contributions were recorded and used;

- a commitment to honouring participants' contributions through accurate representation and proactive feedback;

- enabling access to sources of support for participants, including via facilitating agencies and schools, both during and after engagement;

- adherence to data protection obligations, through safe transfer and storage of data; and

- ensuring research staff were appropriately experienced, trained and supported to manage 'ethics in practice' in the field. A member of senior staff was always present at fieldwork, and interviews were only conducted by senior staff.

2.5 Limitations

As is the case with all small-scale studies conducted within tight timeframes, there are a number of limitations to the research. Such limitations do not negate the contribution of the research but provide important context to the research findings.

Although we exceeded the target for participant numbers, the overall sample size is too small to claim any degree of representation for the wider youth population. Similarly, while we aimed for and achieved diversity within the sample, it is neither random nor representative of wider demographic patterns. Schools' decisions about which pupils to engage, parents' willingness to let their children engage in a study around sexual harm, and individual pupils' interest in taking part all influenced the nature of the cohort.

The use of different surveys by primary and secondary school participants, while necessary for ethical reasons, has limited the degree of comparison that can be made between the two datasets. Furthermore, while the research elicited a wealth of data that makes an important contribution to the research evidence base, there are some areas in which it raised questions or challenges that were beyond the scope of the research. This is to be expected when undertaking small-scale research in an under-researched field. However, it is important that these topics are taken forward in future research if we are to achieve a more holistic understanding of the contextual factors influencing children's and young people's experiences of online sexual harm, and the education they receive in relation to it.

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16   In line with Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse requirements, opt-in parental consent was obtained for all participants aged under 16 years. Information materials for parents and carers were provided to support facilitating schools and agencies to obtain this. Participants' own consent was obtained by researchers prior to the commencement of any data collection, following their initial interest having been confirmed by facilitating schools or agencies.

2.6 Interpretation notes

There are a number of important points for a reader to bear in mind when reviewing the research findings in the chapters that follow. Potentially the most important is the mixed-methods nature of the study and the differing types of data elicited from surveys, focus groups and interviews. The survey data draw on a broader sample and cover a wider range of issues. The focus group and interview data come from much smaller numbers of participants and cover a smaller range of issues, but are more in-depth and nuanced. Neither is more important than the other; they offer important complementary insights that contextualise and enrich the contribution of the other.

Some other points that readers should bear in mind in relation to the presentation of research data are:

- The differing focus of the primary school and secondary school surveys. While the secondary school survey solely and explicitly addressed online sexual harm, the primary school survey explored issues of online sexual harm within the context of online harm more generally. This means that many of the primary school survey participants' responses relate to online harm more generally, encompassing, but not restricted to, sexual forms of harm. This is always noted in the text.

- The relative proportions of males and females within the sample. This is particularly relevant to interviewees, all but one of whom were female. The focus group and survey samples also contained greater proportions of females than males.

- Presentation of percentages and numbers:
  - Different sample sizes: primary school survey statistics are based on 39 responses, compared to 174 secondary survey responses. This should be borne in mind where comparisons are made between these datasets.

  - Throughout the report, percentages have been rounded up or rounded down to the nearest whole number. Therefore they do not always add up to 100 percent.

  - Where questions were multiple choice (identified within the text) and participants could select more than one option, percentages total more than 100 percent as they represent the numbers who selected each option.

  - The numbers on which percentages are based (recorded in tables using n=) will frequently be less than the overall number of participants, as they exclude missing data, for example participants who were not asked the question on the basis of previous answers, and those who chose not to answer it.

  - Percentages cited with reference to open-ended questions relate to researchers' high-level coding of free-text answers. They may be subject to a degree of misinterpretation, and as such should be interpreted as indicative proportions rather than an exact count.

- Descriptors of participants. Throughout the report, participants are described by participant type (survey, focus group, interview), age and sex. As focus group contributions could not be attributed to individual participants, age can only be narrowed down to the age range of those participating in the group (14–16 years of age).

CHAPTER 3: Being online

Key research findings

- Participants reported spending substantial amounts of time online. Time spent online generally increased by age. Half of 16–18-year-old secondary school survey participants, for example, spent six or more hours a day online.

- Participants said the main activities they did online were spending time on social media, communicating with others, gaming, doing homework and watching YouTube.

- Participants generally felt more positive than negative about spending time online. While recognising that harmful incidents can and do occur, participants were also keen to emphasise the positive aspects of their online lives, highlighting a range of benefits and enjoyment associated with spending time online. This was true even of those who had experienced online sexual harm. Although keen to stress the risks of this, these participants continued to use online spaces and highlighted positive aspects to this.

- Participants, particularly those aged 14 years or over, felt that adults did not understand children's and young people's online lives, and noted that this undermined the credibility of their messaging around this.

- Few participants raised the issue of online sexual harm as a negative aspect of the internet, unless specifically prompted. The main exception was interviewees who had experienced such harm, who understandably wished to highlight such risks.

- Participants more frequently raised concerns about general online safety issues, including online bullying, hacking and scamming, and the pressures associated with prevailing popularity and approval cultures.

- For participants, the internet is neither wholly bad nor wholly good. Spending time online means navigating the concurrent presence of opportunity and enjoyment, with pressure and harm, sexual or otherwise. There was strong consensus around the need for further support in this regard.

3.1 Introduction

Understanding children's and young people's online experiences and how they view them provides important context to their views on online sexual harm and how they are educated around this. These issues were explored across all three elements of the research, using a definition of 'being online' that encompassed 'doing anything that involves the internet'.

3.2 Spending time online

All but two of the survey, interview and focus group participants said they spent time online. Mobile phones were the device most frequently used to go online, but computers, tablets and games consoles were also used by participants.

It was interesting to observe the number of survey participants who struggled to answer the question of how long they normally spend online in a day; 32 percent of primary school and 11 percent of

Figure 3.1: Average time spent online per day by survey participants, by age

Percentages are based only on those who selected a time band, with 'don't know' answers excluded.
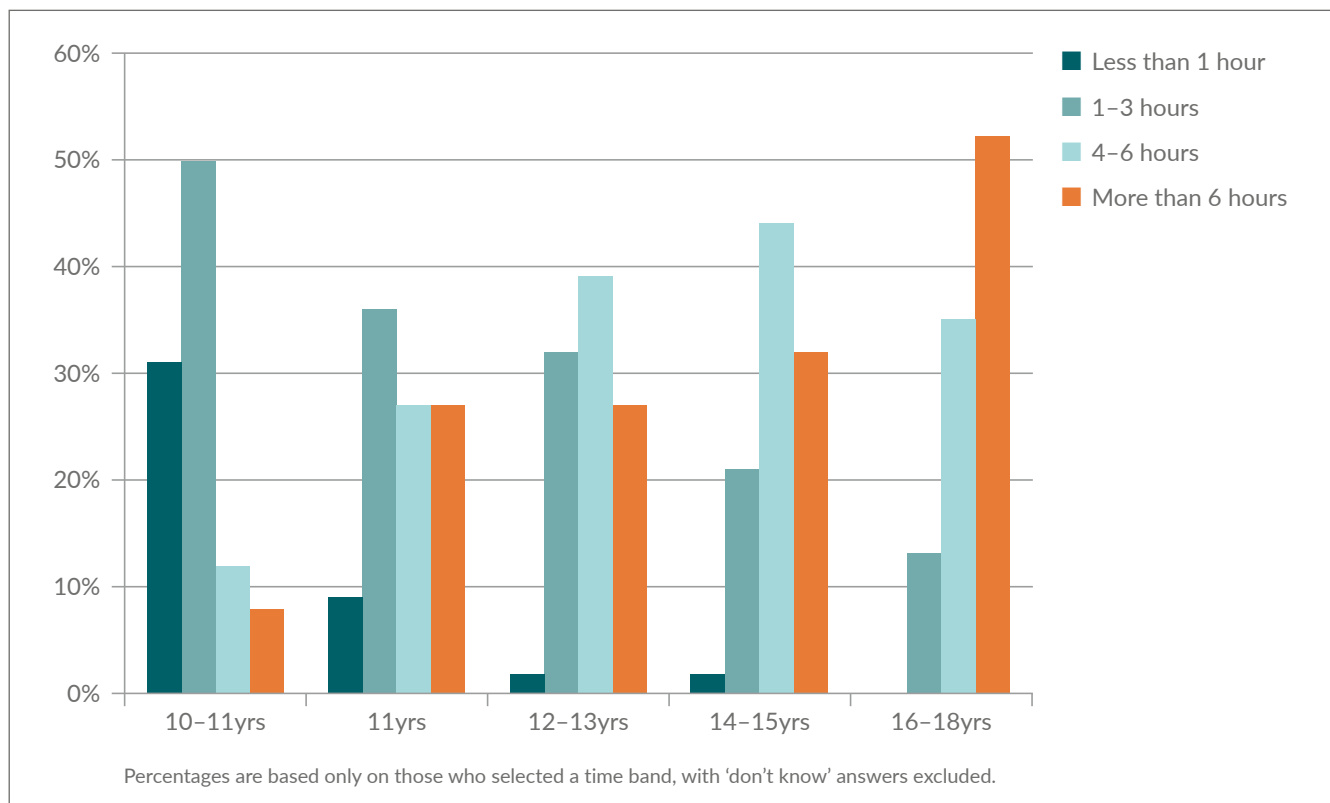
secondary school participants answered 'don't know' to this question. The proportion of secondary school participants would have been higher had we not responded positively to three of the groups' requests for permission to check their screen time on their phones.[17] Interestingly, the conversation that ensued between participants in these groups when they checked their screen time demonstrated surprise at how long they spent online via their phones.

It is apparent from those survey participants who were able to provide an answer that children and young people are spending substantial amounts of time online. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, time spent online generally increased by participant age, with the majority of primary school survey participants spending an average of up to three hours online per day, and the majority of secondary school participants spending four hours or more.

An observable change in time spent online was apparent between those in primary and secondary school, with 11-year-old participants in the secondary school survey spending much longer online than 10–11-year-old primary school survey participants.[18] Over half (54 percent) of 11-year-old secondary school participants spent four or more hours a day online, for example, compared to 18 percent of primary school survey participants. As Figure 3.1 demonstrates, time spent online continued to increase with age throughout secondary school, with a further noticeable increase among those aged 16–18 years.

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17   It cannot be determined whether these participants' answers only reflected time spent online via their phones, or whether they added time spent online via other media to their answers.

18   As with all comparisons between primary and secondary school survey responses, the different sample sizes should be borne in mind.

There was no discernable difference between time spent online by males and females in the primary school survey data. The same was true of secondary school survey participants who spent three or less hours a day online. However, differences emerged between those spending four or more hours a day online, with males within this cohort spending longer online than females.

3.3 Online activities

Both primary school and secondary school survey participants were asked what they did online. Primary school participants were given a series of multiple-choice options, presented below in order of frequency of selection:

- Playing games (87 percent)

- Doing homework (79 percent)

- Watching YouTube videos (79 percent)

- Chatting to people (74 percent)

- Watching films or TV programmes (55 percent)

- Other (3 percent; n=1).[19]

Secondary school survey participants were asked a free-text question, 'What three things do you do most online?' Their answers most often identified spending time on social media (67 percent),[20] gaming (47 percent) and watching YouTube videos (44 percent). Thirty-one percent also reported talking to people as one of the three things they do most online, but the medium through which they did this (social media or otherwise) was not clarified.[21]

Although the free-text nature of the question does not lend itself to detailed statistical analysis, the researchers' categorisation of these answers does indicate a number of overarching age- and sex-based patterns.

- Males more often reported spending time gaming online than females (77 percent compared to 27 percent), and females more often reported spending time on social media than males (78 percent compared to 52 percent).

- The proportions of those gaming online decreased with age (35 percent of 16–18-year-olds compared to 79 percent of 11-year-olds), while proportions of those saying they spent time on social media increased with age (80 percent of 16–18-year-olds compared to 29 percent of 11-year-olds).[22]

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19   Although slight variations were observable (for example, 92 percent of males and 85 percent of females play games), there were no obvious sex-based differences in how primary school survey participants spent their time online. As with all primary data, no age-based analysis was run given the similar age of all participants.

20   The two most frequently cited social media platforms were Instagram and Snapchat, both of which were specifically cited by half of those who mentioned social media.

21   Nineteen participants identified both social media and talking to people within the three things they do most online. They have been categorised as both, even though the categories may overlap.

22   Higher proportions of 11-year-olds did say they communicated with people online (57 percent); it may be that some of this was via social media but not explicitly identified as such.

3.4 Views on being online

This section explores participants' views about being online. It outlines the aspects that they identified as positive and negative and explores the complex realities of navigating the advantages and disadvantages of the online environment.

Participants' perceptions of spending time online were generally more positive than negative. Although they acknowledged a range of risks and challenges associated with the online environment, they were keen to emphasise – and have others recognise – the positive aspects of their online experiences. This was true even of those who had experienced online sexual harm. Although these participants were keen to stress the risks and realities, they continued to use online spaces and highlighted many positive aspects to this.

3.4.1 The attractions of being online

Both primary and secondary school survey participants were asked what they enjoyed about spending time online. Primary school participants most frequently highlighted playing games, with 53 percent identifying this within their free-text response. Talking with people (37 percent) was the next most frequently identified 'like', followed by learning things (21 percent) and watching YouTube (16 percent).[23] Many primary school participants identified multiple aspects they liked about being online in their answer.

> *"I like watching YouTube, and it helps me with my homework. Also I chat with others that I know, such as friends and family."*
>
> 11-year-old female survey participant

Asked what they enjoyed about spending time online, secondary school survey participants also identified multiple aspects of their online experience, including gaming (26 percent),[24] learning about things (15 percent), and watching things (14 percent TV/Netflix; 8 percent YouTube).

> *"I can watch videos, talk to my friends and family and play games."*
>
> 12-year-old male survey participant

> *"The fact that I can speak to friends and have the opportunity to learn things about the world and see what celebrities get up to when they share snippets of their life on social media."*
>
> 16-year-old male survey participant

Being able to communicate with others was by far the most frequently identified enjoyable element about spending time online, with 74 percent of secondary school survey participants (62 percent of males and 83 percent of females; no observable age patterns) including this within their free-text answer. This included both communicating with people they already knew and the potential to meet new people.

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23   Answers that included multiple elements have been coded to all relevant categories. The same is true of secondary school survey answers.

24   Replicating the patterns identified in relation to what they spend their time on, more males and young participants identified gaming in their answer to the question 'What do you like most about being online?'

> *"The people you can meet and catching up with old friends."*
>
> 15-year-old female survey participant

> *"I enjoy spending time online because it gives me some confidence because I know who I am talking to and I want to be able to keep in touch with them. Talking to them keeps me happy and I absolutely love it."*
>
> 17-year-old female survey participant

Interview and focus group participants also highlighted the attraction of being able to communicate with others online, strongly emphasising the significance of online spaces for sustaining existing friendships and making new ones. Focus group participants, for example, shared a range of examples of establishing new relationships online, whether through the inclusion of friends of friends on shared group chats, or connecting with people through online gaming or interest- or hobby-specific sites.

> *"Let's say you're in a group chat with some friends. You're friends with three of these people and there's two other people you don't know but they're friends with your friends, like friends of friends. I think that's OK. They're your age, they're friends and you kind of know who they are. And then if you meet up with your three friends and the two friends you don't know, you can make friends and that's how you make friends."*
>
> 14–16-year-old-female focus group participant

Such connections were seen to be not only acceptable and commonplace, a normal part of existing in an online community, but also one of the positive opportunities offered by the internet. This ease of transition with which strangers can become friends, and therefore no longer be seen as strangers, holds important implications for how children and young people hear educative messaging about risks from strangers.

3.4.2 Dislikes about being online

Asked what they disliked about being online, survey participants made little explicit reference to concerns about sexual harm, although it may be that this was disguised within more generic answers about safety or approaches from strangers. Only three (14–16-year-old male) secondary school survey participants[25] (and no primary school participants) specifically mentioned risks of sexual harm, mentioning paedophiles, predatory behaviour and sexual grooming.

A wider group (two primary school and 15 percent of secondary school survey participants) did identify approaches from strangers and people they do not know as something they dislike, but did not explicitly link this to concerns about sexual harm.

> *"People I don't know chatting to me."*
>
> 11-year-old female survey participant

> *"People that you don't know can try to add you and meet you."*
>
> 11-year-old male survey participant

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25   Two aged 12 years, and one aged 16 years.

A further 7 percent of secondary school survey participants commented generally on safety issues, but again did not explicitly link this to sexual harm or explain what dangers they were referring to.

> *"It can be a dangerous place to involve yourself in."*
> 16-year-old female survey participant

> *"It can be unsafe, and you can text or meet the wrong person."*
> 14-year-old male survey participant

The issues most frequently cited by both male and female survey participants as something they disliked about being online were bullying and nasty or rude behaviour. This was identified by 23 percent of primary school and 22 percent of secondary school participants.

> *"Toxic people roasting me."*
> 11-year-old male survey participant

> *"In some ways there can be hate and bullying which is hard to avoid."*
> 15-year-old female survey participant

Interview and focus group participants also identified nasty or disingenuous behaviour online as a negative aspect of the internet, reflecting on how the internet enabled people to conceal their identities and behave in ways they would not in other spheres of life. Though including examples of online sexual harm (as explored in Chapter 4), this also included other abusive or exploitative behaviours such as bullying, hacking or scamming.[26] Unsurprisingly, given their experiences of online sexual harm, interviewees more strongly emphasised risks of sexual harm when discussing the downsides of spending time online, although such experiences did not stop them from spending time online, nor were they seen to negate the positive aspects of the internet.

This reflects the wider messaging from interview and focus group participants that the internet is neither wholly bad nor wholly good. Spending time online means navigating the concurrent presence of opportunity and enjoyment, and pressure and harm, sexual or otherwise. While recognising that many developed strategies to manage this, especially as they got older, there was a clear desire across all participant groups both for further support on how to navigate potential risks and for action to be taken to reduce the pressures and risks young people face online (see Chapters 6 and 7).

3.5 Wider influences on online experiences

One of the issues both interview and focus group participants[27] raised concern about when discussing their online lives was the influence of wider social norms on their online experiences. These included the normalisation of sexual violence and harmful gender norms (discussed in the next chapter), the influence of celebrity culture, and the pervasiveness of an 'approval culture' tied to one's online

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26   Concerns about hacking and scamming were also identified within the survey sample, particularly by primary school participants for whom it was the most frequently cited 'dislike' of being online (30 percent).

27   There was little consideration of this by survey participants, but nor was it explicitly asked about.

presentation and number of likes and followers. Participants observed how the public nature of children's and young people's online lives, and the viewing and critique of them by others, meant they experienced high levels of pressure about how to look, what to do and what to say in order to gain approval and popularity.

> *"When you first get social media you're a bit overwhelmed. You're like 'Oh my gosh, this person is adding me', like 'hi' … It's your first year at secondary school, that's where all the pressure really comes in – who's got the most friends, who's got the most followers, who can take better pictures – that's where it all starts really."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"I think that links back to people feeling like they need approval from others. Instead of just being happy with who they are, they feel like they need to have some sort of approval from other people, so people liking their photos … "*
>
> *"People on YouTube and stuff like that have really big follow accounts on Instagram and Twitter, and people want to be like them and have that many followers and likes, so they put their account on public and try and get people to follow them who they don't really know."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participants

> *"They said, 'The way to fit in is to do this, you make new friends', and then you become what they would call popular, and because I was the outcast, I was the outsider of this massive circle, I thought 'Maybe if I do this I might be able to fit in', but then it turned into consequences for me."*[28]
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

Participants observed how this pervasive approval and popularity culture sat at odds with online safety messaging around controlling your privacy settings and not communicating with strangers (as explored in Chapter 6).

3.6 Perceptions of adults' understanding

Although not unanimous, there was a strong feeling across all participant groups who considered the issue[29] that adults did not fully understand the realities of children's and young people's online experiences. For example, the majority (77 percent) of secondary school survey participants agreed with the statement 'I don't think adults understand children's and young people's lives'; 35 percent said this was 'very true' and 42 percent 'a bit true'.[30] Although there were no observable differences between males and females, there was an observable age difference, with the likelihood of a participant strongly agreeing with the statement increasing with age. The age of 14 appeared to be a particularly critical point in this regard, with 41 percent of 14–15-year-olds and 46 percent of 16–18-year-olds saying the statement was 'very true', compared to 20 percent of 11-year-olds and 23 percent of 12–13-year-olds.

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28   The consequence for this young person was an experience of online sexual abuse.

29   Primary school survey participants were not asked about this.

30   Only 15 percent disagreed with the statement, with the remainder saying they didn't know.

Most interview and focus group participants similarly expressed a belief that adults did not fully understand either the nature of the online environment or the realities of young people's online lives.[31] They highlighted (primarily with reference to parents, but also teachers and adults more generally) adults' limited experience of being online. They noted that many parents had grown up without the internet, and even those who did use it did so under very different conditions to young people now.

> *"It's mainly because the internet is a really new thing, and the evolution of that, your online image, your real image, has evolved so recently I guess that adults … they only know what they've listened to on CBN or BBC or ITV, whatever they watch."*
> 14-year-old male interviewee

> *"My parents have Instagram and Facebook, whatever, but the experience that they have on it as adults, even if they try and put that experience into the mind of a young person, it's not the same as actually being a young person being brought up around this sort of social media culture."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

Focus group participants in particular observed that adults' lack of understanding of online spaces manifested itself in different ways when it came to concerns about online harm. For some, it resulted in 'ignorance' about what children were doing online and the risks that they might face as part of this. This was particularly observed to be the case with some parents.

> *"Many adults aren't actually aware of what their kids actually do online, so they don't really monitor what's going on and their kids' online behaviour … The kids might tell them, but they might not understand what they mean by certain things that happen to them online."*
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

> *"I feel like they [parents] always know things a couple of years after, so something could be going on right now which is really harmful to children and they wouldn't know."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

For other adults, lack of understanding was observed to result in disproportionate levels of worry and alarm, and an almost singular focus on the potentially negative aspects of the online experience.

> *"Sometimes I think they see it as something that takes away from life, but it can be used for loads of good stuff as well, for education and whatever else."*
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

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31   Whether this opinion was also influenced by age cannot be determined, as with the exception of one 13-year-old interviewee, all interview and focus group participants were aged 14 years or over. Therefore, there is no younger cohort to compare against.

"I sometimes think that adults get too scared to let their children online – in my opinion the rewards outweigh the risks."

14-year-old male survey participant [32]

"It's like quite good that they do obviously worry about your safety, but I think sometimes parents forget about the good things that come from social media, like being able to see parts of the world you never see or share things with your friend … "

"Talk to people you've never experienced before … "

"Exactly. So I think sometimes they need to focus more on the positives instead of jumping to all the conclusions."

14–16-year-old female focus group participants

As explored in the next chapter, parents and other adult family members were observed to be one of the key sources of learning about online sexual harm for children and young people. In light of this, there was a recognised need for them to be both adequately informed about, and appropriately measured in their engagement with, their children's online lives.

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32   A small number of survey participants also commented on this in the open 'anything else you would like to tell us?' section at the end of the survey.

CHAPTER 4: Knowledge of online sexual harm

Key research findings

- Almost all secondary school survey participants and a significant majority of primary school survey participants demonstrated existing knowledge of online sexual harm.

- School was identified as the most common source of learning. Family members, friends and peers, and the media were also identified as significant sources of learning, although this varied slightly according to age. Nine percent of secondary school survey participants said they knew about online sexual harm through personal experience.

- Participants' responses revealed a need and desire for better understanding of online sexual harm, including why it happens, the different forms it can take, how to identify it, what to do if it happens and the impacts it can have. Interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm were particularly passionate about the importance of others knowing more about the risks and impacts of online sexual harm.

- In terms of the nature of online sexual harm and potential sources of risk, participants' contributions suggested some potentially critical omissions in knowledge and understanding. These were particularly notable in relation to potential harm from peers and those within their social circles.

- While many participants noted increased exposure to risk within online environments, others also identified some protective aspects of being online.

- Participants were very aware that their exposure to online sexual harm was influenced by wider cultural contexts. These included prevailing harmful gender norms or expectations, and the normalisation of sexual violence.

- The majority of participants indicated feeling that it is their responsibility to keep themselves safe online. Such a belief can negatively impact on the likelihood of reporting or accessing support, an issue of particular concern to interviewees who have experienced online sexual harm.

- Participants indicated varying degrees of willingness to report experiences of online sexual harm. Decisions about reporting were noted to be influenced by a range of context-specific factors, including feelings of self-blame, the perceived severity of the harm and perceived repercussions of reporting.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores participants' knowledge of, and attitudes to, online sexual harm, and the variety of ways in which they have learned about this. It looks at their understanding of what constitutes online sexual harm, and where risk of and responsibility for it lies. It also explores the factors that affect their experiences of such harm. The chapter also explores the issue of reporting online sexual harm and the factors that influence children's and young people's decisions around this.

4.2 Have young people heard about online sexual harm?

All but three secondary school survey participants[33] said they had 'heard or learned about online sexual harm' prior to their involvement in the research. The majority of primary school survey participants also demonstrated existing knowledge about online sexual harm. Presented with a series of types of online harm and asked which of them they had heard about before taking part in the research, around 70 percent selected one or more of the explicitly sexual forms of harm (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Primary school survey participants' awareness of online harm[34]

Type of harm (predefined options)	% of primary school survey participants (n=32)
People being nasty or bullying you online	100%
Someone grooming you online	31%
A stranger making friends with you and then hurting or harming you when they meet you	91%
Someone talking to you about sex or other sexual things	69%
Someone sending you, or asking you to send them, nude photos or other sexual pictures	63%

Primary school survey participants were also asked how old they were when they first heard about online harm. The majority (88 percent) of those who could remember said they had been nine years old or younger.[35] Asked if they felt children their age (10–11 years) needed to know about online harm, 100 percent agreed, with 89 percent agreeing strongly.

4.3 Sources of learning about online sexual harm

When asked where they had 'heard or learned about online sexual harm', secondary school participants selected multiple options from a list, demonstrating exposure to the issue from a variety of different sources (see Table 4.2). After school lessons, the most frequently cited sources of knowledge were friends and peers, family, online information and TV/films. No obvious differences between males and females were observable within this. The only obvious differences between age groups related to learning from family and friends or peers, with the former more frequently cited by younger participants (aged 13 or under) and the latter more frequently cited by older participants (aged 14–18 years).

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33   One 12-year-old female, one 12-year-old male and one 13-year-old (sex not identified).

34   Data taken from predetermined response options to the question 'Which of these types of harm had you heard about before today?'; responses in order of presentation within the survey.

35   This question only appeared in the primary school survey. It was not specific to, but included, online sexual harm.

Table 4.2: Secondary school survey participants' sources of knowledge about online sexual harm[36]

Source of knowledge	% of participants who selected this (n=171)
Lessons in school	79%
Talking to friends/peers	48%
Talking to a family member	47%
Reading information online	45%
TV or films	43%
Other things I have read (eg leaflets, magazines)	26%
Other professional adult (eg youth worker, sports coach)	22%
Personal experience	9%
Can't remember	6%

It is notable that 9 percent of secondary school survey participants said they had learned about online sexual harm from personal experience. Although more females than males reported this, when considered proportionately there was little observable difference, with 8 percent of males and 10 percent of females reporting this. The ages of those who reported knowing about online sexual harm from personal experience ranged from 12–18 years (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Secondary school survey participants who had learned about online sexual harm through personal experience, by sex

Age	Males (n=5)	Females (n=10)
12–13 years	2	2
14–15 years	2	5
16–18 years	1	3

Primary school survey participants also demonstrated learning from a range of sources in their multiple-choice answers, although it is important to note that their responses related to hearing about online harm generally rather than online sexual harm specifically. As can be seen from Table 4.4, school lessons and parents or other adult family members were the most frequently identified sources of learning. Just over one-quarter of primary school aged participants (27 percent) reported that they had heard about online harm because 'something harmful had happened to me or someone I know', but whether or not such experiences were of a sexual nature cannot be determined from the data.

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36   Data taken from predetermined response options to the question 'How have you heard or learned about online sexual harm?'

Table 4.4: Primary school survey participants' sources of knowledge about online harm[37]

Source of knowledge	% of participants who selected this (n=33)
School lessons	88%
My parents or other adult in my family	88%
TV or films	50%
Being online	47%
My brother/sister	47%
Friends	38%
Things I have read (eg leaflets, magazines)	38%
Something harmful happened me or someone I know	27%

4.4 Understanding of online sexual harm

4.4.1 Perceived sufficiency of knowledge

Secondary school survey participants were explicitly asked if they thought they knew enough about online sexual harm. Although there were no observable age differences in their answers, there was a difference between males and females, with males demonstrating more confidence in their knowledge about online sexual harm than females did (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Secondary school survey participants' responses when asked 'Do you think you know enough about online sexual harm?', by sex

Response options	Overall sample (n=174)	Males (n=66)	Females (n=102)
Yes	49%	61%	42%
Sort of, I know some things but would like to know more	36%	26%	44%
No, I don't know anything about online sexual harm	2%	3%	1%
Don't know	13%	11%	13%

Although 49 percent of secondary school survey participants said that they knew enough about online sexual harm, their answers to other survey questions (which were not designed to test their knowledge) suggested their understanding may not be as comprehensive as it could be. Both their answers and those of other survey participants indicated potential partial understandings and misunderstandings in

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37   Data taken from predetermined response options to the question 'How have you heard or learned about online sexual harm?'

relation to what constitutes online sexual harm, potential sources of risk, and where responsibility for preventing harm lies (explored further in section 4.4.2).[38]

Thirty-six percent of secondary school survey participants explicitly identified a desire to learn more about online sexual harm. Asked what they would like to know more about, their answers most frequently included: how online sexual harm happens (30 percent); how to recognise and avoid it (23 percent); what to do if it happens (23 percent); and impacts and consequences (14 percent).[39]

> *"How to tell if I am in danger of online harm before experiencing online harm."*
>
> 17-year-old male survey participant

> *"The different types; how to spot it and how to help others."*
>
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"How to tell people, because sometimes it can be awkward. Also how to stop sexual harm."*
>
> 12-year-old female survey participant

> *"Why people do it and how people feel when they go through it and how they cope afterwards and how you would help them."*
>
> 16-year-old female survey participant

Interview and focus group participants highlighted similar gaps in their knowledge around identification, avoidance, reporting and impacts of online sexual harm and sources of support.

4.4.2 Understanding of what constitutes online sexual harm

As participants were provided with a definition of online sexual harm as part of their introduction to the research, they were not directly asked what they understood online sexual harm to be. However, their wider contributions, emanating from a range of different questions and discussions in which they shared insights into the nature of online sexual harm and associated sources of risk, do offer some useful learning in this regard.

Of particular note are an explicitly stated desire to learn more about the forms of online sexual harm (reflecting the gaps in sufficiency noted above) and reflections on online sexual harm that focus on particular types and sources of harm, to the virtual exclusion of others.

For example, secondary school survey participants' most frequently identified suggestion for improving school-based education about online sexual harm[40] was to include more information about the nature of harm that could occur. Furthermore, where secondary school survey participants did comment on

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38   The purpose of this question was to ascertain participants' views on whether they knew enough, and not to try and objectively determine if they did know enough, hence the difference between their perceived rates of knowledge and subsequent commentary around partial understandings.

39   High-level categories created by the researchers from free-text answers.

40   Included in 39 percent of participants' free-text answers to 'what could have been done better?' with regard to the school-based education about online sexual harm they had received.

the nature of online sexual harm, they did so almost exclusively with reference to online approaches from unknown adults, with scant reference to potential risk from peers or those within their existing networks. This may indicate that they are more familiar with some forms of online sexual harm than others.

A wider range of examples of online sexual harm were identified by focus group participants, particularly within the harm-ranking exercise. These included:

- online sexual approaches from adult strangers;

- 'catfishing' (people pretending to be someone they were not);

- sexual harm within peer relationships;

- exposure to pornography (particularly highlighted by the male group); and, most frequently

- sexting.

Very few participants cited examples of online sexual harm that led to contact sexual offending. It may be that this was not foremost in their minds, because although it was explained to them to include online contact that led to offline harm, discussions were around 'online sexual activities'.

When discussing online sexual harm, focus group and interview participants shared examples of risks associated with specific platforms, apps or activities. Social media and gaming figured highly in these discussions. Snapchat (a social media and image-sharing app), Facebook, Instagram, Omegle (chatroom to connect with strangers), and Discord (voice and text chat for gamers) were all repeatedly cited by participants across different elements of the research as spaces where sexual harassment or other forms of online sexual harm took place. This does not imply that risk does not exist outside these apps or platforms; these were simply the ones participants shared when discussing risks of online sexual harm.

Focus group and interview participants' primary concern, and the issue they spent most time discussing, was sexual images. Many participants related experiences of them, or others they knew, receiving unsolicited explicit sexual images (primarily sent from boys/young men to girls/young women and often described as 'dick pics') and requests to send someone a nude image (sometimes accompanied by coercive messages to do so). During these discussions it was noted that once sent or received, nude images became a source of further coercion, usually associated with threats to share them more publicly.

> *Researcher: What is worrying for young people online?*
>
> *"Nudes, screen shots … "*
>
> *"Others getting your image and sending on to others … "*
>
> *"Blackmail"*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participants

> *Researcher: What type of things come to mind when we talk about online sexual harm?*
>
> *"Let's say, maybe a 16-year-old sent a photo of themselves to someone, and then they send it [to] someone else, and that person's used it as leverage to get more photos off of them."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

Like survey participants, many focus group participants also recognised that their knowledge of online sexual harm was incomplete, noting both a desire and need for further understanding of the various ways in which online sexual harm can occur. For example, while most could identify sexual approaches from adult strangers as harmful, there was much less clarity about what constituted sexual harm within the context of peer relationships and existing online networks. This included difficulties working out when online sexual activity between peers, including within relationships, is 'normal', and when it constitutes a form of online sexual harm. Focus group participants explicitly raised wanting more support around this issue.

Interviewees, despite having experienced some form of online sexual harm themselves, also expressed a desire to understand more about the full range of ways in which it could manifest. As several interviewees noted, limited descriptions about the nature of risk inhibited them from identifying types of online sexual harm which fell outside this narrative.

> *"I knew about passwords and blocking people, and stranger danger type things, but I didn't know that you can get groomed, or sexual abuse online, or something like that, I didn't know anything about that."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"When we were told about child sexual abuse, we always think about rape … face to face. But I think with gaming as well, all of my friends play Xbox, sometimes you can get matched with 42-year-old [men] from America, sometimes there are filters [to hide your identity] if you're typing, but if it's a voice chat, that was never mentioned, nothing like that was talked about."*
>
> 20-year-old female interviewee

4.4.3 Responsibility for online sexual harm

Researchers' analysis of participants' contributions around online sexual harm indicated potential concerns in relation to the degree to which children and young people saw themselves as being responsible for preventing such abuse occurring. Though recognising that parents and carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, participants' contributions repeatedly suggested that they felt it was ultimately their responsibility to keep themselves safe from online sexual harm.

This issue arose in different forms across the research. The vast majority of both primary (91 percent) and secondary school (85 percent) survey participants, for example, agreed strongly or moderately with the statement that it is their responsibility to keep themselves safe online.[41] Such a belief was also demonstrated in secondary school survey participants' views on what young people need to know about online sexual harm. By far the most frequently identified theme within this (identified by 75 percent of participants) related to actions that children and young people should, or should not, do to protect themselves from harm. This included advice to:

- not talk to, or meet, strangers/people you don't know (n=56);
- keep their account private/don't give out personal information (n=27);

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41   The secondary statement was 'It is my responsibility to keep myself safe from online harm'; the primary statement was 'It is up to me to keep myself safe online'.

- not send images (n=20); and

- use the 'blocking facility' (n=10).

Although recognising that responses may have been influenced by the wording of the question,[42] the disproportionate focus on young people's self-protective behaviours merits highlighting. It suggests there may be questions to ask about the messages children and young people are receiving about their perceived roles and responsibilities, and those of others, in preventing online sexual harm.

A belief that it is up to children and young people to keep themselves safe online holds implications for how they may feel if they experience sexual abuse. This can result in feelings of guilt and self-blame, and in blame from others. This, in turn, can reduce the likelihood of children and young people seeking and receiving support in the event of experiencing abuse. This was understandably a particular concern for interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm, although it was highlighted to a degree across all elements of the research.

> *"[There's] bullying around the situation, which just makes people more quiet basically. It can be for different reasons ... the reason that you're dumb that you were giving such pictures to a person ... the second [reason] could be victim-blaming thoughts, you did it because you wanted to, or something like that."*
>
> 14-year-old male interviewee

> *"I'd rather [children or young people] speak up about it instead of suffer in silence, because the reason why I suffered in silence was because I thought I was going to get in trouble for it."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"It's a lot easier to talk to friends than anyone else, but also you don't want to be judged for it as well, so you might not talk to them."*
>
> 13-year-old female interviewee

4.5 Contextual influences

4.5.1 The significance of 'online'

Although participants from focus groups and interviews repeatedly highlighted a need to situate online sexual harm in wider contexts of risk (as discussed in more detail in Chapter 6), there was also a recognition that the dynamics of online spaces present young people with distinct and sometimes heightened risks compared with face-to-face interaction.

Specific dynamics which were associated with risks of online sexual harm included:

- the potentially anonymous nature of the internet;

- the potential for unsolicited contact;

- use of voice chat or live streaming;

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42   Taken from the question 'Based on what you know, what do you think are the 3 most important things young people need to know about online sexual harm?'

- disinhibition of children's and perpetrators' communication online;

- insecurity of personal information; and

- the global networked nature of possible contact.

Emphasis was placed on the differing nature of online contact, and how it affects perceptions of individuals in a way that may increase exposure to risk of online sexual harm.

> *"If I saw a creepy man walking down the road, I'd walk the other way, while if a person messaged me, they had no profile picture and then they seemed normal, I'd engage in conversation because, you know, they seem normal, they don't look dangerous or harmful. So, it's like that, the way you see people, the way you view them, there's two different ways."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

Conversely, a number of focus group participants and interviewees also identified specific protective aspects of the online environment. These included the potential ease, for some, of managing online sexual bullying or harassment, compared to offline experiences, through the use of 'blocking' or privacy settings. They also included the anonymous or distant nature of communication, which some participants felt encouraged the reporting of online sexual harm either to those in an official capacity or peers.

> *"If parents had a bad experience [of someone harassing them], they'd just try and stop seeing them, whereas like, if we have a bad experience texting someone, you can just block them and then they're kind of gone. And I don't think [parents] understand that it's that easy."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

4.5.2 Harmful gender norms and the normalisation of sexual violence

Some interview and focus group participants' contributions demonstrated repeated exposure to certain forms of online sexual harm, most often unwanted requests for, and receipt of, sexual images. This was particularly true for female participants, a number of whom reflected on the 'normality' of this within both their own experience and their wider social circles. They further reflected on how this obscured the abusive nature of such experiences, with repeated exposure resulting in desensitisation that, in turn, meant such incidences came to be viewed as just an everyday part of life rather than something harmful to be acted upon. This holds obvious implications for continued exposure to such harm, and the likelihood of receiving any support around it.

> *"I don't think my dad realises how many messages from random boys I get or how many dick pics I get. And I have to deal with it every day … It's kind of like a normal thing for girls now … I've been in conversations [online] like, 'Hi. Hi. Nudes?' I'm like, 'No'. … yeah, it literally happens that quickly. Like, 'What's your age?' And you'll say how old you are, you're underage, and they'll be like, 'Oh OK', and then they'll ask for pictures."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

> *"The whole Snapchat thing – and sending nudes on Snapchat – it's just normal."*
>
> 20-year-old female interviewee

With varying degrees of explicitness, both male and female participants highlighted how such experiences of online sexual harm were influenced by the impact of harmful gender norms. When discussed with reference to males, these focused on myths around males not experiencing sexual harm, and the ways in which stereotypes about how males should behave could obscure the realities of young males' online experiences.

> *"Boys are often told to laugh it off as well, which I don't think is fair. It's like they're often told just to make it a joke and it'll be over, but it's not the same told to girls."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

> *"They're not used to showing emotions like that … boys grow up thinking that they need to be the biggest, the strongest … pressure to try and do everything yourself and not actually be able to."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

When discussed with reference to females, considerations of the impact of gender norms focused more on pressures to act in certain ways and do certain things, and the judgements that ensued whether they followed or resisted the expectations on them.

> *"It's like, 'You're female, send me this picture', or, 'What do you look like?', or, 'Send me a picture of yourself, of your face', or whatever, and it's just trouble from there, that's an instant block from me."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"I think it's a pressure thing, most girls would be, there's either two ways, it will either be, 'You've done that [sent a nude image], I can't believe you've done that', or they'll be like, 'Why don't you do that, you're frigid', if you don't do it."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

> *"I could speak to my friends about, 'Oh yeah, I got sent a dick pic, I blocked him and that's fine', while a person you don't really know, if they overhear you saying about a dick pic they might be like, 'Oh yeah, [girl's name]'s a slag, she receives dick pics, she sends stuff', and they will like twist your words."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

4.6 Reporting concerns about online sexual harm

Both primary and secondary school survey participants were asked if they would tell someone if they were worried about something online. Although not specifically asked in relation to experiences of online sexual harm, their answers provide helpful contextual information about the likelihood of reporting concerns, barriers to reporting and who they would report these to. Their overarching answers are presented in Table 4.6; the detail that accompanied the answers is explored in the subsections that follow.

Table 4.6: Whether survey participants would tell if they were worried about someone online

Response	Primary school survey participants (n=34)	Secondary school survey participants (n=170)
Yes	76%	63%
No	3%	9%
It depends	21%	28%

4.6.1 Sharing concerns

As can be seen from Table 4.6 above, the majority of both primary school and secondary school participants said they would tell someone if they were worried or concerned about something online. Female primary school participants were more likely than their male counterparts to say they would tell someone (85 percent compared to 55 percent).

While no equivalent sex-based differences were observable in relation to secondary school participants, differences in responses by age were. Those aged 13 or under were more likely to say they would tell someone if concerned than those aged 14–18 years; for example, 80 percent of 12–13-year-olds said they would tell someone compared to 46 percent of 16–18-year-olds.

Survey participants who said they would tell someone if they were concerned about something online were asked who they would tell. Both primary and secondary school participants most frequently said they would tell a parent, carer or other family member (see Table 4.7).[43] Interview and focus group participants also discussed the potential of sharing concerns about online sexual harm with parents, carers or other family members. For some, the 'closeness' of familial relationships was identified as a protective factor which supported reporting, whereas for others such 'closeness' was cited as a reason why it could be hard to report experiences or concerns.

Table 4.7: Who survey participants would tell if they were worried about something online

	Primary school survey participants (n=26)	Secondary school survey participants (n=107)
Parent/carer	46%	67%
Family member (not specified)	30%	14%
Other trusted adult	30%	5%
School	4%	16%
Friend/peer	0%	10%

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43   Free-text answers were categorised by the researchers.

As can be seen from Table 4.7 above, only 4 percent of primary school survey participants and 16 percent of secondary school survey participants said they would tell someone at school. Taking concerns to someone in school was also discussed by interview and focus group participants. A few focus group participants noted that school felt an easier place to report than home. This was noted to be due to the more professional nature of child-teacher relationships and a perception that some teachers may understand the online environment more than some parents.

> *"Teachers might understand a little bit more than parents, because they're sort of surrounded by people who are invested in the social media culture … If you feel like a teacher would understand you, you can go see them. So, at school there's more [young] teachers, so it's a bit easier [to talk to them] than parents. And … at home you see your parents all the time, you love them so much [so it's hard to tell them]."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

A number of interviewees, however, shared negative experiences of reporting incidents of online sexual harm to teachers.

> *"They were quite young [the teachers] themselves – who were dealing with it and they were kind of blaming both of us – me and the boy [who perpetrated the abuse] – punishing us both."*
> 17-year-old female interviewee

Although only 10 percent of secondary school survey participants said they would tell a friend if they were concerned about something online, friends emerged as a much stronger source of advice and support within interviews and focus group discussions. Friends were noted to play a significant role within focus group and interview participants' support networks around online sexual harm. This was both in terms of being someone to disclose to if something occurred and a source of advice on navigating the online world and how to manage exposure to potential risk.

> *"There was one time when [my friend] got sent a picture like that and I was like, 'It's a little bit weird', I was like, 'Do you even know him?', she's like, 'No', and I was like, 'Why have you added him then? Delete him.' … I've told her about my experiences, and I've told her, 'It's not a place you want to be, it's honestly the worst place you could ever be.'"*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

Although not identified within the survey, some interviewees and focus group participants also mentioned a reporting app such as the 'Click CEOP button'[44] as a potential option for reporting concerns, but there appeared to be variable awareness of, and access to, such mechanisms.

> *"I saw this thing one time where it's like the eye and it has two legs on it and you could click that and you could block someone or if someone's being a bit iffy, you know, like not very, like if you're a bit suspicious and you can just block them and you can never talk to that person again."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

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44   A button that can be added to a website, to allow direct reporting of concerns to law enforcement.

"Personally I don't think it's easy – the report button – that isn't even made clear. It is hard to find it and hard to see what you're meant to do on some sites – obviously you could get in touch with the app provider, but that's hard to do too."

13-year-old female interviewee

4.6.2 Factors influencing the decision on whether to report

As outlined in Table 4.6 above, not all survey participants said they would tell someone if they were concerned about something online. Indeed, one primary school participant and 9 percent of secondary school participants definitively answered that they would not tell anyone. A range of reasons were given for this, which included it not being their business, it being wrong to tell, the awkwardness of telling and fears it might make the situation worse.

"I'm not a snitch."

14-year-old male survey participant

"It's my problem/my business."

18-year-old female survey participant

"Awkward."

15-year-old female survey participant

"Too nervous … if I told someone what I was looking at, it would haunt me."

14-year-old survey participant, sex not provided

"It rarely makes situations better, and gets more people involved."

15-year-old male survey participant

A further 21 percent of primary school and 28 percent of secondary school survey participants said that whether or not they would tell was dependent on something. Asked what it depended on, the most frequent answer (given by 50 percent of primary and 58 percent of secondary school participants) was how serious the concern was.

"How serious the situation is."

11-year-old female survey participant

"Depends on how severe the situation is."

17-year-old male survey participant

"How bad it was and how much it affects me."

15-year-old female survey participant

Other factors identified by survey participants (though much less frequently)[45] as influencing whether or not they would report concerns were: how close they were to the affected person (if they had not experienced it themselves), how badly the incident was affecting them, and whether reporting it might result in negative outcomes for them or someone else.

> *"If it was one of my friends, I would."*
> 13-year-old male survey participant

> *"How I was feeling about the situation, eg embarrassed/fearful."*
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"If it was something to do with me doing something wrong, I (probably) wouldn't."*
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"If someone would get angry at me for it happening."*
> 12-year-old female survey participant

> *"Variables such as the effect telling someone would have either on me or those around me."*
> 17-year-old male survey participant

The importance of context was also identified in interviews and focus group discussions about whether or not young people would share concerns about online sexual harm. Responses about whether they would share concerns, and who they would share them with, were noted to be conditional on a number of factors, including the nature of a child's or young person's relationship with an individual, the perceived likelihood of being judged or blamed, the anticipated level of understanding they would receive, and the potential for anonymity.

> *"Young people feel as if older people blow it out of proportion if they were to say anything like that. They'd start thinking, 'You're in danger' – which you are, but you don't realise when you're younger, so you wouldn't, you don't want people to think you're in danger when you don't think you are."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"You mostly end up telling them [friends] online … it's a lot easier to do it online, because you don't have to see their face and you don't feel judged or you don't know if they're judging you. I told my friend online … it was a lot easier that way."*
> 13-year-old female interviewee

A number of interviewees commented on the stigma associated with reporting sexual violence, online-facilitated or otherwise, and identifying oneself as a victim, observing how this could negatively impact upon the likelihood of reporting.

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45   A button that can be added to a website, to allow direct reporting of concerns to law enforcement.

Awareness of the options available for reporting was also highlighted as an important factor influencing propensity to report, with the importance of this emphasised by interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm.

> *"It's kind of a trap really, you don't know what to do because you don't know what the options are; it's like telling somebody to get outside of a room when you can't see any windows or doors in a way."*
>
> 14-year-old male interviewee

Participants' contributions also suggested that the likelihood of reporting was negatively influenced by the minimisation of sexual harm explored earlier in this chapter, with frequent exposure to sexual approaches, communication and imagery decreasing the likelihood of seeing such encounters as something worth reporting.

> *"I think it's [sending nudes] become common enough where it's that much of a thing that just happens, that a lot of people feel it's something that they need to do and it's not something that they should feel worried about because it's that common, so they maybe wouldn't think about it enough as they should."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

> *"I can remember when I was with my friends and saw messages, it was like, 'Get your tits out', we were just laughing about it, we didn't do it, but it was just a giggle, it was like, 'Oh my God, what the hell', we didn't see it as, 'Oh my gosh, this man wants to see my boobs', we see it as, 'Oh my gosh, did you see that?'"*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

CHAPTER 5: Provision of school-based education about online sexual harm

Key research findings

- The vast majority of participants thought that schools have an important role to play in educating children and young people about online sexual harm.

- However, some participants had not received such education, or had received it too late after they had been exposed to or experienced online sexual harm.

- Participants emphasised the importance of schools educating children about online sexual harm before they start spending time on social media or other online forums. They highlighted how failing to do this increases children's risk of harm because they do not know what to look out for, how to respond or how to access help.

- Recognising the increasingly young age at which children are spending time online, participants highlighted the importance of education about online sexual harm starting at primary school.

- They also emphasised the importance of school-based education being delivered on an ongoing basis, rather than as a one-off input.

- Participants further expressed the need for education to consider pupils' different learning styles and needs, and to use a range of engagement techniques, such as talks and videos, to meet these.

- Participants identified a role for both school staff and external organisations in delivering learning in schools about online sexual harm. This included bringing in those who had experienced sexual harm and could talk directly about their experiences.

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on participants' experiences of school-based education about online sexual harm and their views on whether, when and how such education should be provided. It draws on data from all three elements of the research, reflecting on the similarities and differences between what participants say they want and what they have experienced. The next chapter builds on this, exploring participants' views on the content and relevance of school-based education about online sexual harm and how it could be improved.

5.2 School delivery of online sexual harm education

Across all three elements of the research, there was strong support for schools to provide pupils with education about online sexual harm.

> *"Schools should take more time to teach students about online sexual harm."*
> 11-year-old female survey participant

> *"School is definitely the right place. Because like everyone mostly goes there – unless you get excluded, but that is only a really small number; then school is the way that you get to the most number of young people."*
> 20-year-old female interviewee

> *"I think school is a good place because we're learning there anyway ... if it was an optional thing to go to, not everyone's getting the education they need in it, whereas in school they have to be at school, so as much as it's not a nice thing to say, they're forced to be there, but it's much better because that means that they, everyone, can learn about it and not just skive off because they don't want to do it."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

There was, however, a difference between the proportion of participants wanting such education and those who had actually received it. For example, 89 percent of secondary school survey participants said that schools should provide education about online sexual harm.[46] However, only 78 percent said they had received such education themselves, with 13 percent saying they had not received any school-based education about online sexual harm, and the remaining 9 percent unsure as to whether or not they had. No observable age or sex differences were apparent within this.

Primary school survey participants also indicated strong support for school-based education about online harm, including online sexual harm, again with a greater proportion wanting this than had actually received it. Without exception, all primary school survey participants said that primary schools should teach children about online harm.[47] Presented with a set of options as to what types of online harm primary schools should teach children about, 73 percent selected explicitly sexual forms of online harm. As can be seen from Table 5.1, this is notably higher than the proportion who reported having been taught about these forms of harm within school to date.

Table 5.1: Primary school survey participants' views on the types of online harm that are taught about/should be taught about in primary schools[48]

Type of harm (predetermined options)	% who have been taught about this in school (n=35)	% who think primary school should teach about this (n=33)
People being nasty or bullying you online	100%	97%
Someone grooming you online	34%	79%
A stranger making friends with you, then hurting or harming you when they meet you	94%	94%
Someone talking to you about sex or other sexual things	49%	73%
Someone sending you, or asking you to send them, nude photos or other sexual pictures	49%	70%

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46   Only two participants (1 percent; one who had not received such education and one who wasn't sure if they had) thought that schools should not teach young people about online sexual harm; the remaining 10 percent were unsure.

47   Asked what this should entail, 87 percent selected 'how to stay safe when I am online', 74 percent selected 'the types of harm that could happen to children online', and 65 percent selected 'what to do if I'm worried about something online'.

48   Data taken from predetermined response options to the question 'Which of these types of harm had you heard about before today?'; responses in order of presentation within the survey.

5.3 Timing of educational input on online sexual harm

As can be seen from Table 5.1 above, approximately half of primary school survey participants said they had received education about online sexual harm while at primary school. A lower proportion of secondary school survey participants indicated receiving such education at that age, with 35 percent saying they first received education about online sexual harm while at primary school. Secondary school survey participants more often first received education about online sexual harm in secondary school, with 48 percent first receiving this between years 7 and 9, and 17 percent in year 10 or later.

There were, however, some important age-based patterns within this that indicated that younger secondary school participants were more likely to have received education about online sexual harm at primary school than their older counterparts. While this may indicate that primary schools are increasingly engaging with this issue in recent years, it is not possible to confirm any definitive patterns.

Asked if they thought the age at which they first received school-based education about online sexual harm was appropriate, those who received it at a younger age more often felt this to be appropriately timed than those who received it when older.

- Ninety-five percent of those who first received school-based online sexual harm education in primary school (years 4–6) thought this was the right age.

- Sixty-seven percent of those who first received such education in years 7–9 (secondary school) thought it was the right age; 29 percent thought it was too late.

- Eighty percent of those who first received it in year 10 or later said this had been too late.

Those survey participants who felt that they had received education about online sexual harm too late were asked why they thought this. Their answers closely resonated with those provided by interview and focus group participants, many of whom also felt they had received education too late or insufficient levels of education.

Participants' predominant reason for believing that education should be delivered at an earlier stage than they had received it was the need for such education to be provided before a child starts to spend time on social media sites or time online unsupervised. They observed that once children start doing this they are at risk of, and are, being exposed to online sexual harm. They highlighted how failing to educate children about online sexual harm before this time increases their risk of harm, because they do not know what to look out for, how to respond or how to access help.

> *"I think they could have done it a tiny bit earlier, because I was already on my phone in year 6 [aged 10–11 years] and I was already getting messages from random people and I didn't know what to do."*
> 14-year-old female interviewee

> *"Because if young people know more about it that it might prevent them getting in this situation."*
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"... had already done stuff that was actually illegal."*
> 14-year-old male survey participant

> *"Lots of people by the time we're already doing that subject might have already have shown stuff like that and now that they're actually learning about it they might think, 'Oh, I've actually done some of this'."*
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

A number of participants, across all three elements of the research, shared that they, or others they knew, had experienced online sexual harm before receiving any school-based education about it. Many observed that had they been appropriately educated at an earlier age, this could potentially have been avoided or more quickly stopped.

> *"I didn't know that being sent something unconsensually was illegal – I thought it was normal when I received it."*
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"People are just leaving it a bit too late, they're waiting for people to experience it, to then go, 'Oh yes'."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"There's no point in learning about a situation after the situation has actually goddamned happened."*
> 14-year-old male interviewee

> *"[I experienced online sexual abuse] at 12 ... start of year 7, I actually wish somebody came into school like some people do now in high schools ... so I was more aware of what it was and I would have been able to see the signs quick enough, than going through it for probably six, seven months and then having to report it to the police because it got too far."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

Participants across all three elements of the research expressed strong support for such education to begin in either late primary school or early secondary school, although there were mixed opinions, particularly between survey participants, as to which of these it should be.[49] However, when the contributions of all participants are considered as a whole – and in relation to the earlier ages at which children and young people are going online – support for the provision of online sexual harm education to begin during primary school emerges more strongly.

As outlined earlier in the chapter, all primary school survey participants said that primary schools should teach children about online harm, with 73 percent specifically selecting one or both of the explicitly sexual forms of harm within this. Furthermore, although 51 percent of secondary school survey participants felt online sexual harm education should begin in early secondary school (compared to 43 percent opting for late primary school), when run against age bandings, much stronger support for primary school provision emerges among younger participants (see Figure 5.1). This is likely to reflect the pattern (observed by participants of all ages) of children having access to smartphones and spending more time online at a younger age than previously.

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49   Asked when school-based education about online sexual harm should begin, 51 percent of secondary school survey participants felt it should begin in years 7–9 compared to 43 percent who felt it should begin in years 4–6.

Figure 5.1: Secondary school survey participants' views on when online sexual harm education should commence, by age
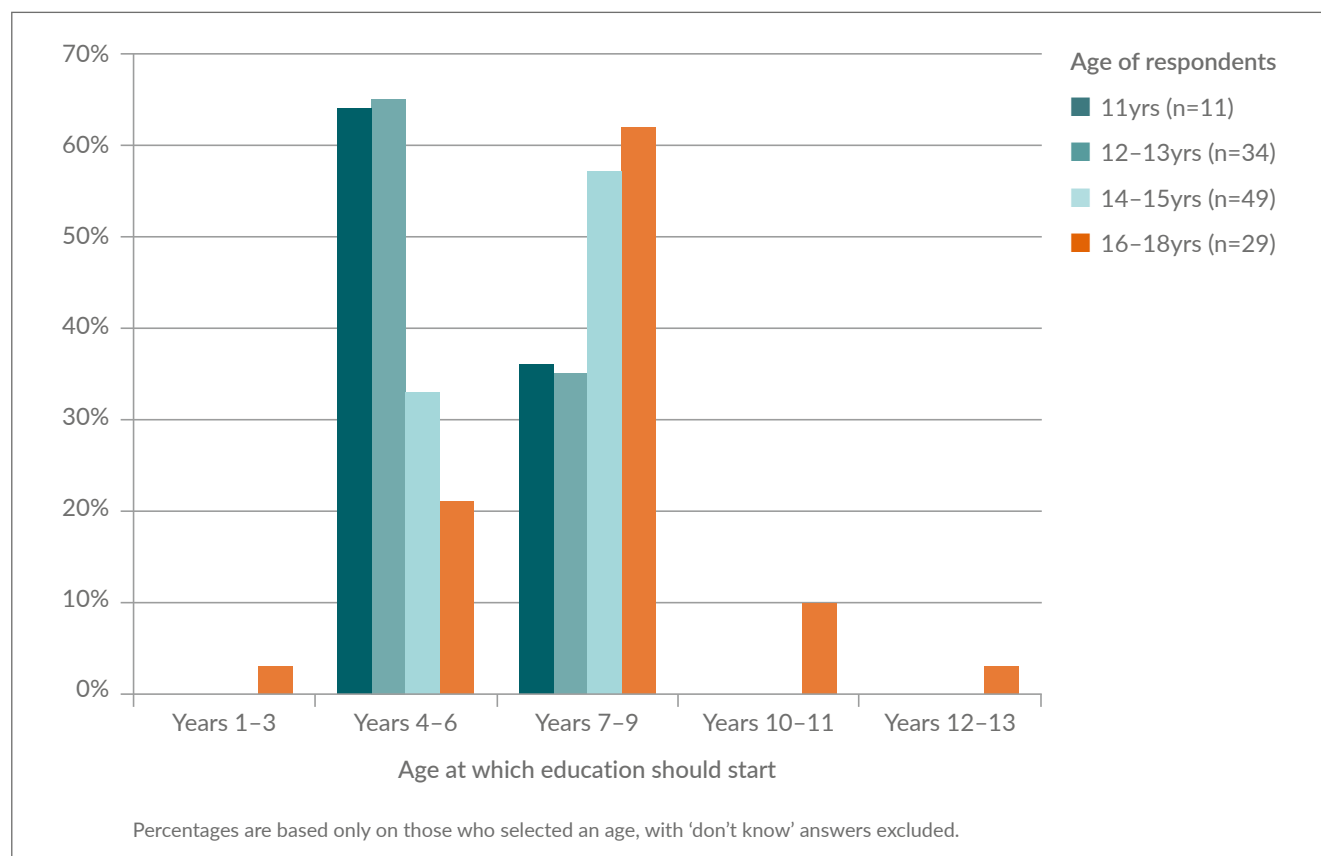
Though recognising this started earlier for some, participants from across all three elements of the research particularly highlighted the significance of years 6 and 7 in terms of increased time spent online and engagement with social media. They emphasised the need for education about online sexual harm to be provided as soon as, or before, children start using social media and spending more time unsupervised online, so they were not left unaware and unprotected.

> *"Younger students are using social media and are online from a younger age than secondary school, so they need to be informed on this serious matter."*
> 16-year-old female survey participant

> *"I think it [education] should actually start when young people start getting mobile phones, iPhones and stuff like that, that you can get onto social media onto, because if they start doing something like I did – or get random 'adds' from people, like, 'I might know you, I'll add you', and then they'll get the exact same thing [abuse] as me, it just causes a whole new problem."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"I got a mobile phone [at primary school] and I was using the internet more, and so I think it's better when you start going on the internet as you're more vulnerable to sexual harm."*
> 11-year-old female survey participant

> *"Sexual harm can happen to anyone at any age so as soon as a child has access to online."*
>
> 13-year-old male survey participant

Some participants raised concerns about the dangers of sharing too much information with children too young, and unnecessarily scaring or shocking them, or putting them off using the internet due to fear. These were, however, predominantly shared with reference to years 4 or 5 and below, as in the comments below from young people who had first received education between years 4 and 6 and felt this to have been the right age.

> *"Because if you are younger it will ruin your childhood and you would worry too much, but if you're older you know more and won't be afraid."*
>
> 12-year-old male survey participant

> *"If you tell a kid who is too young you might scare them and make them demonise the internet. However, you leave it too late they may have already experienced bad things."*
>
> 14-year-old male survey participant

5.4 Regularity of education

Irrespective of when they thought schools should first teach children about online sexual harm, there was a strong consensus among participants that such education needed to be provided on an ongoing, rather than one-off, basis. The vast majority of secondary school survey participants, for example, felt that it needed to be provided either annually (46 percent) or more than once a year (39 percent).[50]

Similar messages emerged from focus groups and interviews where participants noted the limited usefulness of a one-off, stand-alone educational input.

> *"In the play [about child sexual exploitation] they asked us questions about the characters and about what happened, but after that lesson, when that play was over it wasn't spoken about, nothing."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

> *"Yeah, the things that they're saying are good, I don't think they say it enough. So, maybe like twice a year we'll have an assembly on e-safety and sexual violence online. Well, all they're saying is perfect, I just don't think it's pushed enough."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

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50   Seven percent felt it should be once at primary school and once at secondary school, 3 percent felt it should only happen once, 2 percent selected 'other', 3 percent selected 'don't know'.

5.5 Delivery personnel

Secondary school survey participants were asked who had delivered the school-based education about online sexual harm that they had received, and who they would like to deliver this 'in an ideal world'. Similar proportions said they would like to be taught by a member of school staff (68 percent) as had experienced this (64 percent). PSHE teachers and, to a lesser degree, school counsellors were the staff most frequently cited as the person they would most like to teach this subject.[51]

Slightly higher proportions, however, said they would like to be taught by someone from an outside organisation (65 percent) than had experienced this (47 percent).

- Fifty-three percent said they would like to be taught by an adult from another organisation coming into school (more frequently identified by under-14s than those aged 14 or over).

- Forty-three percent said they would like to be taught by a young person from another organisation coming in to school[52] (49 percent of females compared to 36 percent of males).

Primary school survey participants also indicated interest in being taught about online harm by someone from outside their school. Although only 36 percent said they had experienced this, 74 percent said they would like to.

The main reason why secondary school survey participants wanted to have someone external talk to pupils about online sexual harm was their specialist knowledge and comfort in discussing the topic.

> *"Because it is coming from someone who knows what they are talking about".*
> 14-year-old male interviewee

> *"I feel having someone coming from outside of school to present us a video or talk to us would make it feel more important and professional, as it's someone outside our school experiences."*
> 18-year-old male survey participant

The importance of knowledge and comfort with the subject was also identified by interview and focus group participants, a number of whom observed these to be lacking in their own experiences of teacher-delivered education about online sexual harm.

Particular mention was made, across all three elements of the research, of the potential benefits of hearing directly from young people who had experienced online sexual harm. Such an approach was perceived to be more credible and relevant, and potentially more engaging for pupils.

> *"People learn best by example; give students the opportunity to hear testimony from someone with example."*
> 17-year-old male survey participant

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51   Sixty-two percent said they would like to be taught about online sexual harm from a PSHE teacher, 32 percent said a school counsellor and 11 percent another teacher.

52   Given the numbers who selected both options, the overall proportion of those wanting someone from outside to teach about online sexual harm is 65 percent.

> *"By talking to people who have had those experiences it makes it a lot more real. I feel like by having other young people talking to you about it, they can connect on a more personal level than an older person who doesn't know the internet as well as a younger person."*
>
> 16-year-old female survey participant

Issues of credibility, related to teachers' familiarity with the online environment, were also raised by interview and focus group participants, who observed levels of online experience to vary considerably between different teachers. Most of these participants felt that they had more extensive online experience than the majority of those delivering their education about online safety. This, as some noted, distinctly undermined the credibility of the messaging being delivered.

5.6 Learning preferences and resources

Both primary and secondary school survey participants were asked how they would like to learn about online sexual harm within school, and were presented with multiple-choice options as to approaches and resources that could be used. The options, and the proportions who selected them, are outlined in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Survey participants' preferred ways of learning about online (sexual) harm[53]

Learning method	% of primary school participants who selected this (n=35)	% of secondary school participants who selected this (n=153)
Someone talking to us	89%	75%
Showing a video	80%	73%
Giving a quiz	57%	n/a[54]
Online learning/quiz	n/a	36%
Watching a play	49%	27%
Written information leaflets	49%	18%
Other	3%	5%

While some options were more popular than others, the key message that emerged from analysis of participants' choices and supporting explanatory text is that there is no one technique or resource that will work for everyone. The majority of participants selected multiple options, highlighting that different approaches had different strengths and weaknesses. They also highlighted that the methods' relevance and use would depend on pupils' preferred learning styles, and highlighted the need to ensure that schools catered for all of these.

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53   Secondary school participants were asked the question in relation to learning about online sexual harm specifically, while primary school participants were asked in relation to online harm more generally.

54   The wording of the option differed across the two surveys, with primary school participants given the option of 'quizzes' and secondary school participants 'online learning/quiz'.

5.6.1 Someone talking to us

The most frequently selected option was 'someone talking to us', selected by 89 percent of primary and 75 percent of secondary school survey participants. Reasons given for this by secondary survey participants who were asked to explain their choices included: the expertise and experience of the person, including the person's ability to share his or her own experiences (as explored above), and the more personal nature of the communication and the potential for this to be interactive and more engaging.

> *"Because human interaction/people talking makes it easier to get the point across."*
> 15-year-old female survey participant

> *"Because they will learn better listening to someone talk about it instead of reading it."*
> 14-year-old male survey participant

> *"As they will help involve students, so they will understand and take in the information given and make it fun and educational so the message gets [across]."*
> 14-year old-female survey participant

However, a number of participants highlighted potential negatives of learning through a talk in their explanations for why they chose other options.

> *"I feel someone talking to someone makes the person scared so they cry or laugh."*
> 15-year-old female survey participant

> *"Some people (including me) find spoken presentations all the time boring so would not pay attention."*
> 13-year-old female survey participant

5.6.2 Use of other resources

Both those who said they would like to learn from someone talking to them and those who did not select this option expressed support for resources such as videos and leaflets to be used when educating children and young people about online sexual harm in schools. As can be seen from Table 5.2 above, the degree of support varied somewhat by resource type, with videos being selected most frequently.

However, what is more notable than the specific proportions choosing each resource type is the frequency with which participants selected multiple options and their rationale for this. This included commentary on the importance of accommodating a range of learning styles and needs, and the potential for reinforcing messages through complementary forms of communication.

> *"As a kid with ADHD my attention span is poor, so those answers that I had chosen is for everyone – even people with learning difficulties or difficulties in life."*
> 16-year-old male survey participant

> *"When you can see and hear things, you can relate to it more and [are] likely to retain more information. Sometimes people may forget, and can use leaflets for example to refresh their memory."*
> 12-year-old male survey participant

> *"Because when children enjoy doing something it tends to stay in their minds longer, and videos can be very informative, and online learning quizzes are a good way to find out about things."*
> 16-year-old female survey participant

When explaining why they chose particular options, a number of secondary school survey participants commented that what was most important was open and meaningful engagement with the issue in a way that reflects young people's lived realities. This, and other more overarching ways in which school-based education can be improved, are explored in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: Improving school-based education

Key research findings

- Most participants who had received education about online sexual harm at school had found this helpful to some degree, promoting the value of such education being delivered.

- At the same time, participants also questioned the usefulness and relevance of current approaches to the realities of their online lives, noting significant room for improvement in this regard.

- Participants' recommendations for improving education about online sexual harm focused on three areas: content, tone of messaging and delivery style.

- In relation to content, participants identified the need for school-based education to better address:

  — all the different ways in which online sexual harm can occur;

  — potential harmful sexual behaviours by young people;

  — the wider context of sex and relationships and other forms of harm;

  — the impact of online sexual harm; and

  — responding to, and reporting, concerns.

- In relation to the tone and emphasis of messaging, participants highlighted the limited usefulness of overly negative or simplistic messaging, noting that such messages are at odds with the complex realities of their online lives.

- The vast majority of participants emphasised the need for messaging to strike a balance between presenting the risks of online sexual harm and avoiding overly fearful or alarmist messaging. Some interviewees, however, advocated evoking fear and distrust as a way of keeping children and young people safe, noting this was driven by the desire to do whatever was needed to protect others from what they had experienced.

- Priorities for improving the delivery style of education on online sexual harm included: fostering dialogue and mutual learning between educators and children and young people, and building on children's and young people's existing knowledge and approaches to managing online risk.

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 outlined participants' views about the practical and logistical aspects of education on online sexual harm (timing, regularity, resources and personnel). This chapter presents their perspectives about the content, style and messaging of such education.

The chapter begins by presenting survey participants' contributions on the perceived relevance and helpfulness of existing education about online sexual harm, before drawing on qualitative data to identify participants' priorities for improving it. This latter section is divided into three key areas – on the content, tone and delivery style of such education – and presents participants' perspectives on the education they have received alongside their views about ways this could be improved.

6.2 Perceived relevance and helpfulness of current provision

Secondary school survey participants were asked to rate the relevance of the school-based education they had received about online sexual harm 'compared to what young people actually experience online'. While the majority rated it as holding some degree of relevance, only 28 percent said it was 'very relevant' to their actual online experiences. As noted in Table 6.1, male participants were slightly more likely to rate their education as 'very relevant' than their female counterparts, who were more likely to view it as only 'sort of relevant' to their experiences.

Table 6.1: Secondary school survey participants' perceived relevance of online sexual harm education

	% of overall participants (n=132)	% of male participants (n=79)	% of female participants (n=48)[55]
Very relevant	28%	33%	22%
Sort of relevant	60%	50%	68%
Not relevant	4%	4%	4%
Don't know	8%	13%	6%

Primary school survey participants were also asked to rate their experiences of school-based education, in terms of 'helpfulness'[56] and in relation to online harm more generally, rather than sexual harm specifically. Their responses were slightly more positive, with roughly equal proportions rating it to be 'very helpful' (43 percent) and 'sort of helpful' (48 percent). However, 9 percent rated it as 'not helpful'. While these figures suggest that some aspects of existing education relating to online harm (in the case of primary school children) and online sexual harm (in the case of secondary school children) are 'helpful' or 'relevant' to their lives, they also indicate clear room for improvement.

This observation is further supported by survey participants' responses to a statement about whether what they had learned at school helped them identify risks of online sexual harm (secondary school survey) or risks of online harm more generally (primary school survey). As noted in Table 6.2, 47 percent of primary and 37 percent of secondary school survey participants noted that the respective statements were 'very true', with both sets of participants more frequently rating the statements as 'a bit true'. No obvious age or sex differences existed in relation to this.

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55   Cases were excluded due to missing sex data.
56   The word 'helpfulness' was used instead of 'relevance' in the primary school survey to aid accessibility. It is important, however, to note that the terms are not synonymous: education could be judged relevant but not helpful. While this limits opportunities for comparison between data from primary and secondary school participants, the researchers felt the benefits of 'readability' outweighed this limitation.

Table 6.2: Survey responses to statement: 'What I've learned at school has helped me to identify risks of (sexual) harm online'

	% of primary school participants (n=34)	% of secondary school participants (n=169)
Very true	47%	37%
A bit true	47%	47%
Not true	3%	10%
Don't know	3%	7%

As explored further in section 6.3 below in relation to suggestions for improvement, the vast majority of interview and focus group participants similarly indicated shortcomings in, and dissatisfaction with, their experiences of school-based education about online sexual harm. They also highlighted dissonance between what they were taught and the realities of what they experienced online.

6.3 Improving provision

This section considers participants' suggestions as to how school-based education about online sexual harm could be improved. It is primarily based on interview and focus group data, as the nature of these engagements allowed for more detailed consideration of these issues. Survey participants' contributions are woven in where relevant, and are primarily taken from secondary school survey participants' responses to an open-ended free-text question about 'what could have been done better' in relation to education they had received about online sexual harm. Table 6.3 presents an overview of their answers, categorised by researchers on the basis of participants' free-text answers. Although 10 percent answered that nothing could have been improved, the remainder offered a range of concrete suggestions. Their contributions are woven throughout the commentary that follows.

Table 6.3: Secondary school survey participants' suggestions for improving school-based education about online sexual harm

Suggested improvement	% of participants (n=94)
More information about the nature of online sexual harm	39%
Change timing/nature of delivery	23%
More information about how to respond if online sexual harm occurs	10%
Nothing	10%
Don't know	10%
Other (no common themes)	8%

Three distinct but related areas for improvement emerged from the data, and are explored in the remainder of this chapter.

- Educational content – the issues explored

- Tone and emphasis of messaging – the nature of the messaging around these

- Delivery style – the approach to teaching and learning.

6.3.1   Improving educational content

Five main gaps in the content of school-based education addressing online sexual harm were identified and are explored below.

i. Education needs to better support children and young people to recognise online sexual harm in all its forms

The suggestion for improvement most frequently cited by secondary school survey participants was to provide pupils with more information about the nature of online sexual harm.[57] Their answers indicated strong support for education to be less vague and to talk about the detail of what constitutes online sexual harm and how they might encounter it. Some participants suggested use of real-life cases or scenarios to support this.

> *"More detail, as I in particular thought that some information I received in earlier years, ie year 10, was a bit vague."*
> 17-year-old male survey participant

> *"Explain more about what it is/why it happens/how it happens."*
> 13-year-old female survey participant

> *"I think talk about more – about people the same age as us going through sexual harm or to go through scenarios that could happen to us."*
> 11-year-old female survey participant

> *"Share a real-life experience."*
> 12-year-old male survey participant

Across all three elements of the research, participants indicated that the education they had received about online sexual harm presented only a partial picture about the nature of risk, often focusing on stereotypical images of perpetrators and abuse. Several survey participants, for example, characterised the main focus of their education as *'stranger danger'*, while a number of focus group participants observed that the education they had received was similarly focused on stereotypes: '*Beware of paedophiles … beware of the white van*' (14–16-year-old focus group participant).[58]

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57   High-level coding of participants' free-text answers to the question 'What could have been done better?' (in their experience of school-based education about online sexual harm) showed that 39 percent of participants' answers related to this.

58   As this was a mixed-sex focus group, the sex of the participant is not known.

As noted in Chapter 4, limited descriptions about the nature of risk inhibited participants from identifying types of online sexual harm which fell outside this narrative.

Participants highlighted the need for education to include the potential for abuse from individuals known to children and young people. This included the potential risk posed by peers, friends and intimate partners, something a number of interview and focus group participants noted to be absent or underplayed within current education.

> *"Obviously they can tell you, 'Don't talk to strangers, don't let strangers talk to you', and stuff, but they should also talk about people that you know and trust, or you think you trust, because they might be more of, you might be more of a target to them because they think you trust them."*
> 15-year-old female interviewee

It is important to acknowledge that the fast-changing nature of technology and young people's patterns of engagement with online spaces precludes the possibility that all potential scenarios of online sexual abuse can be covered by educational content; this was recognised by a few participants. Participants were, however, clear about the need to move away from a reliance on presenting 'typical' stranger-based scenarios, to acknowledge the wide range of ways in which online sexual harm can manifest. Their contributions also suggest that they would value opportunities to learn more broadly about the dynamics of sexual abuse and related concepts such as consent and relationships, so they are able to apply this knowledge to the range of situations they may face, both on and offline.

ii. Education needs to address harmful sexual behaviours
A number of participants, across all three elements of the research, observed how school-based education about online sexual harm focused solely on the behaviours of potential victims, with little if any consideration of young people's responsibility to not sexually harm others.

> *"They always say, 'Don't send pictures, because they might get spread', but the only problem with that is they never say to people, 'Don't spread them'."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

> *"[Improve it by] learning about the consequences of being the predator of online sexual harm."*
> 15-year-old male survey participant

While both males and females highlighted the need for this to be covered, much of the detailed commentary came from females, who clearly emphasised the need for such messaging to be targeted at males, highlighting the need to help males understand both the nature and the impact of sexually harmful behaviour on and offline.

> *"My boy mates … they make rape jokes, they make like sexist jokes, and they know it's jokes but they don't realise the effects; because they're boys they don't realise the effects of being groomed online or being sexually assaulted. So I think someone just needs to sit them down and just tell them straight like, 'This could happen to you if you do this to a girl'."*
> 14-year-old female interviewee

iii. Risks of online sexual harm need contextualising in relation to wider issues about safety, wellbeing and sexuality

Participants described engaging with a diverse range of challenges and potential risks as part of online activity, including sexual interactions that could be either acceptable or abusive, depending on the context. Their perspectives suggest that current education is neither nuanced nor reflective enough to help them handle this. They noted the need for education to better support them to navigate ambiguities within their online social communication and determine when they should or should not be concerned.

> *"I think educating about things like nudes and stuff is hard because yeah, people are taught that it's illegal and everyone understands that, but it doesn't stop people being, like wanting to explore. And like, yeah, it is illegal and everyone knows that, but [you] still do it because you may be attracted to that person or you're just generally just intrigued."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

As alluded to in the comment above, participants in several different focus groups highlighted a desire for education about online sexual harm to acknowledge the legitimacy of their developing sexuality during adolescence and the ways in which this might play out in the online world, and to help them recognise the boundaries between normal and harmful sexual interactions.

> *"I think that schools should not make us fear sexual behaviours online. I think that schools should educate us and make us more aware."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

Another notable finding from interviews and focus groups was the repeated desire to contextualise the topic of online sexual abuse within discussions about broader forms of abuse and harm. Although online platforms present some specific dynamics and risks for young people, or amplify existing risks in new ways, it was clear that the issue was rarely isolated in young people's minds from other forms of sexual abuse and harm.

> *"They're only focusing on a small part of what could happen, they're not really teaching us on the wider spectrum of things, so it can keep us safe in a certain part, but not everything that could happen."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

Participants repeatedly highlighted a need for effective education to acknowledge how wider contexts framed the risks of sexual abuse within their online lives, and to equip them with the confidence and self-esteem they need to manage these risks.

iv. Education should address the impact of online sexual harm

Another recurring theme across all three elements of the research was a desire for education to explore the impact of online sexual harm, supporting children and young people to understand the potentially far-reaching practical and emotional consequences of abuse.

> *"Teachers don't include stuff about the wider implications of abuse."*
>
> 17-year-old female interviewee

> *"Rather than a lesson on the dangers of selfie-taking, the schools should propose the real-world ramifications to the students."*
>
> 17-year-old male survey participant

This was particularly emphasised by interviewees with personal experience of online sexual harm who wanted others to understand the impact that experiencing online sexual abuse could have.

v. Education should address how to respond to, and report, an experience of abuse

A related point, again raised across all three elements of the research, was a need to acknowledge that some children and young people will encounter sexual harm online, regardless of efforts to prevent this. Participants highlighted the need for education to cover what to do if this occurs. This included the need for practical information about where to report harm and about available resources (which participants indicated variable levels of awareness of). It also included a need to address potential barriers to reporting, such as embarrassment, shame or fear of others' reactions. Participants also emphasised the importance of schools equipping young people with strategies to help them to deal with the emotional impact of abuse, and any subsequent fallout.

> *"[Provide] more information on who to go to and where."*
>
> 14-year-old female survey participant

> *"I think that they should teach us about how we should deal with these sexual harm problems. Like they tell us about it, but not how to deal with these problems … "*
>
> *"How to deal with it! And not just telling a teacher or a mate. Just tell us how to deal with it mentally."*
>
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participants

6.3.2 Improving the tone and emphasis of educational messaging

The second key area for improvement, identified across all three elements of the research, related to the tone and emphasis of educational messaging. This was raised in relation to the three key areas explored below.

i. Acknowledging the positives as well as the negatives of the internet

There was a strong message from young people in focus groups, and to a lesser extent secondary school survey participants, that education about online sexual harm needed to present risk proportionately. This meant acknowledging the positive aspects of the internet alongside messaging about the potential risks. Participants emphasised the necessity of this for both educators' credibility and students' engagement with their messaging.

> *"If you [teachers] sort of just come with the approach – this is bad – then you just think – 'you don't understand, so why should I listen?'"*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"It's important not to portray all of [the internet] as bad, so when something bad does happen, people completely know that and are able to get help or stop."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

A few participants highlighted how a failure to balance negative messages with more positive ones could create heightened levels of fear, which in turn could prevent children and young people experiencing the positive opportunities presented by the internet.

> *"My sister when she was in year 3 did a load of stuff on online bullying and, you know, rather than making her a bit cautious, it made her terrified for years. And it's good because you should be wary, you should keep an eye out for things that are wrong, but you should also be able to experience the good parts of it because the good parts, as long as you're safe, they do tend to outweigh the negatives."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

ii. Considering the balance between informing and scaring

The vast majority of participants expressed a clear desire for further information about online sexual harm, including examples of what can happen to children and young people. When discussing how such messaging should be delivered, most participants highlighted the need to strike a balance between presenting the reality of risks of online sexual harm while avoiding overly fearful or alarmist messaging.

> *"It is getting the balance between scaring young people and educating them.* Chelsea's Choice *[an educational theatre production] was a bit scary but helpful at the same time."*
> 14–16-year-old female focus group participant

> *"I really think that kids just need to be taught common sense and not to worry so much about this, it's just fear-mongering and possibly making them more vulnerable to sexual harm online."*
> 13-year-old male survey participant

While most emphasised the importance of proportionality, a minority expressed support for educational messaging to more strongly emphasise the potential for experiencing online sexual harm and the impact this could have. This was particularly apparent among some interviewees, a number of whom advocated evoking fear and distrust among young people as a protective mechanism.

> *"I feel like the messages young people need to hear should be quite scary – show the full implications of stuff and what can happen for those who ignore education – it needs to be scarier."*
> 17-year-old female interviewee

> ***Researcher: Do you think it's important for other young people to know about risks online?***
> *"Indeed! Yes! If they don't know they won't know until it's too late. It can destroy your life."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

The contrast between this view and that generally put forward by others is likely explained by a desire among this cohort to protect others from experiencing what they themselves had experienced. Indeed, this was explicitly acknowledged as the motivation by a few of them.

iii. Considering how simplistic avoidance-based messaging has limited impact

Participants expressed a need for education to go beyond the directive, avoidance-based messages that had been typical of their experiences of online sexual harm education. Across all three elements of the research, participants remarked on the limited effectiveness, and sometimes counter-productivity, of messaging that simply told people to do or not do something, such as '*increase your privacy settings*', '*avoid communication with "strangers" online*' or '*avoid sending any messages of a sexual nature*'.

> *"If you just get taught never talk to anyone on the internet, stay off it, you just think, 'Oh well, I'm going to ignore that', and then you don't actually know what the warning signs are, which means you go on thinking that there's not real risk and everyone's making it up."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

> *"It's the same way as how people go into schools, they go to people, 'This is bad', for example, 'Drugs are bad', 'Smoking is bad', 'Alcohol is bad' … "*
>
> *"It just makes you want to see what it does."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participants

Focus group and interview participants further observed that such avoidance-based prevention messages sat uncomfortably with the other messages and pressures they were experiencing in relation to popularity, status and 'likes'.

> *"With school and stuff, people say, 'Have your account on private', but then it's all about likes and followers and views nowadays … if your account's on private, then only the people that follow you can like your things … people don't really follow the privacy rules, because then it don't really benefit them in lots of ways."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

Participants' contributions indicate that simplistic messaging fails to translate into the complex realities of their lives and is at odds with the subtleties of diverse online communication and networking.

A clear example about the limited efficacy of overly simplistic messaging relates to the issue of children's and young people's decisions to meet online contacts in person, despite being told not to do so in education about online sexual harm. This issue came up in several focus groups, and while many participants nominally endorsed such messages, they also acknowledged that they did not always adhere to them. In one focus group, for example, every participant said they had met up with at least one person who they had initially met online, without an adult present, and showed little concern about having done so. This demonstrates a clear gap between the preventative messaging that young people hear and can repeat (and indeed, as illustrated by survey participants, may pass on to others), and their own actions.

One possible explanation is that the concept of 'strangers', central to educational messaging, does not translate into the online world, where boundaries between stranger and friend are easily blurred. The spectrum of relationships that children and young people engage in online means that educational messages based on simple binaries of 'stranger' and 'friend' are insufficient to support children's and young people's informed decision-making.

6.3.3 Improving the style of education delivery

Within the focus groups and interviews, and to a lesser extent survey responses, there was a strong message that children and young people valued and wanted education which provided opportunities for discussion and reflection on the subject of online sexual harm, as opposed to relying on more didactic teaching styles. This was particularly true of focus group participants, many of whom held up their experience of the interactive focus group as an example of how they would like to learn about online sexual harm.

Participants highlighted how creating space for both the knowledge and insights that young people may already hold and their questions can create a more effective learning medium, both for young people and for those seeking to educate them. As explored below, there appeared to be four specific aspects to this, all contributing to opportunities for children and young people to reflect on and refine their critical thinking.

i. "Directly ask young people, and listen to their experiences" (16-year-old female interviewee)
Several participants remarked that they wanted teachers to ask them for their opinions, or ask them questions, as part of the teaching package. In part, this was linked to recognition that many young people held significant expertise about online activity that was distinct from knowledge held by teachers. Demonstrating respect for children's and young people's own expertise was also noted to be a means of making education more engaging.

> *"If you ask them how things are and explore how, then you could potentially make things safer … more an understanding from both levels … young people engage and relate to it … I think that's a lot more effective."*
>
> 20-year-old female interviewee

ii. "[Create] a space where young people can ask questions" (20-year-old female interviewee)
Participants also described wanting teachers to create an atmosphere which fostered openness and enabled pupils to ask questions that might otherwise be difficult or embarrassing.

> *"I think it has to be relaxed, and somehow you have to make the environment comfortable or kids won't open up about asking questions, because I know that if I was in that situation, I think I'd be more scared of being humiliated if I asked an embarrassing question, then one of the lads would make fun of you. I think it's just getting rid of that tension and embarrassment at the start."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

Smaller groups and, for some, single-sex groups, were noted to facilitate children's and young people's openness, sense of safety and potential for discussion.

> *"It's [current education] not like this [focus group]. In a smaller group you can say what you think … "*
>
> *"Ask for our input. What we think about it."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male and female focus group participants

> *"I think there's some things that might be a little bit, quite, not personal, but a bit explicit just for girls, girls might feel awkward about, when they're around boys, and the same, boys might feel awkward about it when they're with girls."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

iii. *"Focus on what they want to know" (15-year-old female interviewee)*

Focus group and interview participants both reflected on the fact that the agenda for online sexual harm education was generally determined by the adults delivering it. They expressed a desire to be involved in deciding what would be helpful to learn about, noting how this would enhance both the relevance of the learning and their engagement with it.

> *"I think it should be more ask them what they have questions on, and ask them what they want to talk about, not just talk and talk and talk at them, because if you do that then they just won't listen, so if you just, if you ask them a question, or if they ask you a question then you can actually talk, focus on what they want to know, because you might be talking about something that they already know."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

iv. *Build on young people's existing approaches to managing risk*

It was apparent from all three elements of the research that many children and young people were already attempting to manage the risks of online sexual harm. As noted in Chapter 4, data from interviews and focus groups highlighted high levels of sexual harassment and abuse already being experienced and normalised by children and young people. Participants described using a number of strategies to respond to these incidents, including:

- increasing privacy settings;
- blocking unwanted approaches;
- highlighting risk to friends; and
- alerting friends about individuals perceived to pose a risk.

Regardless of the efficacy of these strategies, they demonstrate that young people are already thinking critically and communicating with peers about responding to online sexual harm. While it is imperative to avoid implying that children and young people hold responsibility for appropriately responding to any form of abuse, it is equally important to acknowledge their use of protective behaviours and recognise this as a basis to build on in further education.

CHAPTER 7: Enhancing online safety

Key research findings

- Participants recognise that tackling online sexual harm requires action on many fronts, and not just by schools.

- Participants identified that parents and carers have an important role to play in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, but identified a need to ensure they had access to better information and support. They also highlighted how the nature of the parent-child relationship could either enhance or undermine parents' capacity to protect.

- Participants variably emphasised the legitimacy of parental monitoring and control versus the importance of privacy, trust and independence. It was apparent that achieving an appropriate balance between these concerns is difficult and that it needs to be context-specific, reflecting factors such as the age of the child and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

- Participants also identified a clear role for the online industry to play in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm, suggesting that these responsibilities were not currently being fulfilled. Participants expressed a desire for industry players to do more to 'design out' risk through better controls and 'design in' protective functions through better monitoring and reporting options.

- Participants also identified a need for action at a wider societal level to address a range of harmful social norms associated with online sexual harm. These included: celebrity culture, harmful gender norms and the normalisation of harmful sexual behaviours.

7.1 Introduction

Although the research was primarily focused on school-based education about online sexual harm, participants were also asked what else they thought could be done to help protect children and young people from online sexual harm. This chapter explores participants' contributions on this topic and looks at who else they identified as having a role to play in preventing and responding to the online sexual harm of children and young people.

Three areas for action were identified by participants across the different strands of the research.

- Support from parents and carers
- Industry action
- Addressing harmful social norms.

7.2 Support from parents and carers

Across all elements of the research, participants identified an important role for parents and carers in protecting children and young people from online sexual harm. This includes both awareness-raising and prevention, and the response should exposure to such harm occur.

Parents and carers were identified as one of the key sources from which survey participants heard and learned about online sexual harm. At the same time, however, high proportions of participants highlighted concerns about the degree to which parents and carers understood the realities of children's online lives and the associated risks of online sexual harm (as explored in Chapter 3). A number of participants identified that parents and carers also needed education so that they were more informed about risks of online sexual harm and better equipped to speak to and protect their children.

> *"I think as well as teaching young people about online safety they should actually teach young adults, adults, [and] parents, because then they can warn their own children about it. Because honestly I wish that my mum and dad spoke to me about it, and it would have saved me a lot of stress."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

This desire for parents and carers to speak more openly to their children about the risks of online sexual harm was echoed across a number of focus groups and interviews. Participants who had experienced open conversations with parents appreciated them, while others who had not experienced them expressed a desire for them. Interview participants in particular (reflecting on their own experiences of parental education and the online sexual harm they had experienced) emphasised a need for parents and carers to educate children about online sexual harm.

> *"I think tell [parents] what happens ... If my mum would have told me 'Oh yeah, if you send this person a picture of your body, there's a chance they might post it everywhere and a chance they might show people you love' ... If my mum would have told me that could happen, I reckon I wouldn't have done anything."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

> *"Parents think it's normal to talk about what they would call 'the birds and the bees', but it should also be normal to talk about sexual abuse, online safety ... It's not just something we can brush under the rug, it's something that we need to talk about ... What my dad and mum told me is – well they didn't tell me! When we were in a meeting with the police, they said they didn't think that it was something age appropriate to talk to me about because they didn't expect it to happen at 12 years old, they thought it might start happening around 14, 15, but it happened."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

Participants across both the interviews and focus groups recognised that the ability to have these conversations was not just dependent on parents' knowledge but also on the nature of parent-child relationships.

> *"I think it depends on how aware parents are with social media, and also what your relationship is with your parents. I can tell my mum anything, but some kids can't tell their mums or dads anything."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

Open and trusting relationships, where parents can speak frankly with their children and concerns can be shared, were noted to be a strong protective factor in terms of both managing risk and accessing support if harm occurred.

> *"I'd just be like 'Oh, what's that?' [on my phone] and then I'd tell my mum and my mum would probably block them."*
>
> 14-year-old female interviewee

Conversely, parent-child relationships characterised by an inability to have open and honest conversations about sex, relationships or abuse, or strongly risk-averse parental advice, were seen to close down potentially critical lines of communication.

> *"To always have [sex and relationships] as a topic that you're able to talk about and try and make people feel comfortable and that there's no shame … There are parents who are in a protective bubble and don't want anything to happen, but by not talking about things it just creates a barrier and you can't talk about it."*
>
> 20-year-old female interviewee

> *"Just don't be so strict. Because my mum was really strict. She'd be like 'Don't speak to anyone'. I'd be like 'Why? Now I'm going to go speak to someone'."*
>
> 16-year old-female interviewee

The theme of parental surveillance was raised by participants across all three elements of the research. While there was general agreement that parents needed to have some awareness of what their children were doing online (especially when a child is younger), there was little consensus as to what level of monitoring was appropriate.

> *"Parents, whatever they do, they shouldn't be going through children and young people's phones. That isn't the best thing. That would be my advice for parents – obviously it's important to monitor what your child is doing, but not want to lose children and young people's trust."*
>
> 13-year-old female interviewee

> *"Don't allow [children] to have a phone without their parents watching them."*
>
> 11-year old-female survey participant

> *"Parents need to check their children's social media accounts … Parents need to keep on it. They should go through children's friends and followers lists. When I used to have Insta [gram] there were 30- and 40-year-olds on there following me."*
>
> 17-year-old female interviewee

As illustrated in the quotations above, participants variably emphasised the legitimacy of parental monitoring and control versus the importance of privacy, trust and independence. It was apparent that achieving an appropriate balance between these concerns is difficult, and that there is a need to consider factors such as the age of the child and the nature of the parent-child relationship.

7.3 Industry action

The majority (83 percent) of secondary school survey participants agreed with the statement that 'online sites need to do more to help children stay safe from online harm'. This view was also strongly supported within focus groups and interviews, where some participants also expressed disappointment at the lack of action being taken to realise this responsibility.

> *"I think they [online companies] have a major responsibility, and they don't do it, they don't think about it at all. On Instagram, I've seen no posts about safety."*
>
> 15-year-old female interviewee

Across all three elements of the research, participants identified actions that those responsible for online platforms could take to enhance children and young people's safety. These included both 'designing out' risk through better controls, and 'designing in' protective functions through better monitoring and reporting options. Five key points for action emerged.

i. Embedded warnings and advice for users to read when signing up to social media platforms or other apps

> *"I would make sure that there are a lot of ads of sexual harm instead of loads of ads on naked women and having a summer body."*
>
> 17-year-old female survey participant

> *"I think what would be a really good thing to do is, as you set up an account, they make you go through a safety [information] step by step … It needs something to show you what could happen … when you create an account on Snapchat, if they had a video of showing you how to put it onto 'ghost mode', and how to make a private story, and how to be safe, then it would be so much better."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

ii. Improved enforcement of age restrictions

> *"Age restrictions on social media should be clear and you shouldn't be able to access them [under age]. There should be something to determine that you're not going to get on it unless you can prove your age."*
>
> 16-year-old female interviewee

> *"Enforce better age ratings for certain websites without collateral damage. Instagram's age rating is fine but adult sites are far too accessible."*
>
> 15-year-old male survey participant

iii. Improved privacy settings, including the use of default privacy settings when setting up an account

> *"I would make all accounts private automatically."*
> 12-year-old female survey participant

> *"If I was in charge I would make it so that you can only call, chat etc with your contacts (friends and family), so it reduces the chance of a stranger contacting you and harming you."*
> 12-year-old female survey participant

iv. More obvious and accessible reporting options across all platforms, and stronger action when concerns are reported

> *"Have buttons on the internet that are easily accessible to report issues."*
> 12-year-old female survey participant

> *"You can block [an abusive] account from yourself easily enough, you can just press block, but that doesn't stop them from doing it to anyone else … I think they should just make it easier to report situations … I think they [currently] need a certain amount of reports to that account before they have to shut it off, but surely if they, if you could write in what's happened, they can read what's happened, see how serious it is, surely they should be able to close it off."*
> 16-year-old female interviewee

v. Enhanced moderation of online activity by apps and platforms
A few interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm also highlighted the importance of better moderation by online companies, who they believe should monitor activity in their apps, games or platforms and report concerns to the police. One noteworthy example, shared by an interviewee as an example of helpful practice, described how her experience of online sexual harm was identified by police following her disclosure to a peer, using an online chat facility.

> *"There's this app called MovieStarPlanet – do you know it? Well basically you can chat to strangers online, but they do monitor everything, and that's the programme I was on when I told my friend what had happened to me, and then that triggered the investigation. By telling a friend on MovieStarPlanet – because they took responsibility and they were monitoring what we said and then somehow that got passed to the police and the police came around, and that is only because that app took responsibility."*
> 13-year-old female interviewee

7.4 Harmful social norms

The third area, outside education, where participants identified potential for improved protective action was at a wider societal level. These concerns were particularly raised by interview and focus group participants whose more in-depth engagement in the research facilitated consideration of these complex and nuanced factors.

Participants identified a range of ways in which their online experiences, including exposure to sexual harm, were negatively influenced by norms and pressures operating at a societal rather than individual or group level. While having fewer concrete suggestions as to how these could be addressed, participants' responses did identify the importance of wider society, including the media and celebrity culture, playing an active role in tackling them. Two main issues were identified as requiring action at the societal level.

i Harmful gender norms, and the normalisation of sexual violence

As outlined in Chapter 4, participants highlighted how harmful gender norms could both increase risk of sexual harm, online and otherwise, for females, and decrease the likelihood of reporting for males. The impact of the potential normalisation of sexual violence was also discussed, with a number of participants observing how the regularity with which some young people encountered sexual harm could obscure the harmful nature of such encounters. While identifying a role for schools in educating children about these issues, participants recognised that changing such norms also required action at a wider societal level.

ii The undue influence of the media and celebrity culture, and the online approval culture

As outlined in Chapter 3, interview and focus group participants made clear links between celebrity influence and an online approval culture that celebrated high levels of 'likes' and connections. The pervasiveness of this culture was observed to make children and young people less likely to use privacy settings, which in turn increased their potential exposure to individuals who may sexually harm them.

> *"There's so many sort of role models for young people nowadays who are YouTubers or social media stars who have become famous through that, and [children] sort of aspire to be like them. They think that if they put their account on public, they can then sort of grow a fanbase … I think a lot of people don't really realise how little information you can put on and how much that can give someone who's trying to target you."*
>
> 14–16-year-old male focus group participant

Participants' reflections on the all-consuming nature of this online approval culture, and the myriad ways in which this is enforced by celebrity culture and media content, clearly indicate a need for such cultures to be tackled at a societal level, as well as recognised and addressed within school-based education.

CHAPTER 8: Overarching themes from the research

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the report by highlighting the overarching themes emerging from the research, together with researchers' reflections on the process and the learning from and implications of the work.

8.2 Overarching themes and researcher reflections

Listening to the views of children and young people is critical in ensuring the ongoing development of protective efforts is relevant and beneficial

Those who supported young people's involvement in the research advised that when offered the opportunity to take part, most potential participants were keen to participate. The children and young people who took part said they valued being given the opportunity to think about and discuss issues of online sexual harm, an opportunity that many expressed they had not been given before. A number of secondary school survey participants commented, either at the end of their survey or verbally at the end of the session, that they had found the experience enjoyable and educational. Focus group participants similarly reflected positively on their experience of taking part in the research, with a number of groups citing the focus group as a template for how schools could better educate children and young people about online sexual harm. They observed how the discussion-based nature of the group, and the fact it asked them about their opinions rather than just telling them what to do, enhanced their engagement and made for a positive learning environment.

As demonstrated throughout this report, children and young people hold important insights into how we can better protect them from online sexual harm that, at times, differ from adults' perspectives on this. Interestingly and importantly, views also differed between the children and young people who took part on certain issues. A clear example of this is over the balance that should be struck between communicating the reality of online sexual harm and avoiding overly fearful or alarmist messaging. While most participants highlighted the importance of proportionality, some, including many of the interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm themselves, felt that messaging needed to be fear-inducing in order to effectively protect children and young people from harm. Such differences – and the motivations behind them – would benefit from further exploration in future work, particularly in relation to how we can integrate learning from those who have experienced online sexual harm in a way that is relatable for other children and young people.

Across all three elements of the research, participants shared insightful contributions into the realities of their online lives and how they wanted to learn about, and be protected from, online sexual harm. Finding safe and appropriate ways to further elicit and integrate these differing views is critical if we are to ensure that our protective efforts are relevant to, and beneficial for, children and young people. It is also in line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that every child has the right to a say on matters that affect them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. Furthermore, open dialogue about these issues provides an important antidote to the documented stigma and silence around child sexual abuse that both contributes to the conditions for abuse and can silence those who experience it (Pearce, 2018).

Children and young people need to be prepared for exposure to the risk of online sexual harm before they start spending time online

The research clearly demonstrates that in spending time online, children and young people will likely be exposed to risk of online sexual harm. Indeed, some described this as occurring on a regular basis and feeling like a '*normal part*' of online engagement. As participants highlighted, it is important that we prepare them for exposure to such risks and that we do so in a timely manner.

Given the increasingly young age at which children are spending time online (and in particular using social media, where risks were observed to be enhanced) the research suggests a need to engage children and young people in conversations about online harm from primary school age. This includes awareness of the nature and sources of such risks and what to do when faced with them.

While participants' contributions demonstrate that the majority had some awareness of online sexual harm, there was a high degree of variability in their understanding of online sexual harm, particularly their knowledge about different forms and sources of harm. While some participants recognised the limited nature of the messaging they had received about online sexual harm and wanted to learn more, others (also demonstrating only partial knowledge) appeared to view themselves as adequately informed. This suggests potential gaps in the messaging children and young people are receiving about online sexual harm, which, in turn, holds implications for their ability to identify potential sources of harm.

Children and young people value the opportunities that being online offers, and find overly negative and avoidance-based messaging unhelpful

Though recognising that harmful or distressing incidents could and did occur online, participants' perspectives on spending time online were, on the whole, more positive than negative. This was true even of the majority of the interviewees who had experienced online sexual harm, though understandably to a lesser extent. Many participants felt that adults had limited understanding of the reality of their online lives, observing that adults saw only the negatives and not the positives of spending time online.

This holds important implications for both school-based and other forms of preventative messaging around online sexual harm. As many participants observed, overly negative and avoidance-based messaging that failed to recognise the positive aspects of being online was described as unhelpful or irrelevant. It is not that young people do not want to learn about online sexual harm – indeed, there was clear support for this – but that they want to learn about it in a proportionate and relevant manner.

Schools have a vital role to play in educating about online sexual harm

There was a clear message across all participant groups that schools have a critical role to play in educating children and young people about online sexual harm. Participants had many suggestions as to how education in schools should be improved (as explored in Chapters 5 and 6). Some key overarching observations in this regard are:

- the need for education to be delivered in a timely and ongoing manner, providing foundational learning at primary school level and building upon this in an age-appropriate manner throughout children's education;

- the importance of avoiding a list of 'dos and don'ts' and instead adopting an approach that equips young people to recognise the difference between normal and harmful sexual behaviours and to make informed decisions;

- the need to recognise that children and young people will encounter risks of online sexual harm, and to empower and inform them to feel able to seek support, and inform them from where;

- a desire for education about online sexual harm to be located in a wider exploration of sexual abuse, and sex and relationships more generally;

- a desire for education to recognise the range of cultural norms and pressures which affect children's and young people's online lives and their exposure and response to online sexual harm, and to integrate this into learning;

- a preference for such education to be delivered in a discussion-based manner which recognises the validity of children's and young people's own experiences and views and facilitates two-way learning; and

- the importance of creating a safe environment for such learning. This includes both the creation of safety in lessons about online sexual harm and the wider school environment adopting a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of abuse.

Participants' contributions highlight that delivering education around online sexual harm needs to be recognised as a skilled and important endeavour. It should be afforded a stronger status within the curriculum, and those delivering it should be appropriately trained and supported to do so. Recognising that when discussing online sexual harm within a school environment there will likely be pupils present who have experienced it, it is important that due regard is given to messaging (including any potential victim-blaming messaging) and also to how the process of reporting and seeking support can be more meaningfully realised.

Educative efforts should do more to ensure children and young people do not believe responsibility for preventing online sexual harm lies with them

The issue of children's and young people's sense of responsibility in relation to the prevention of online harm surfaced in a number of different forms across the research. Though recognising that parents and carers, industry and wider society all have a role to play in addressing online sexual harm, the degree to which participants indicated it was up to children and young people themselves to avoid sexual harm was a matter of concern. Their contributions suggest the need to further explore how we can better balance messaging around self-protective actions with appropriate messages about where responsibility for online sexual harm lies.

Families, industry and wider society need to play their part in tackling online sexual harm

As explored in Chapter 7, participants recognise that school-based education is only one part of the larger response required to better protect children and young people from online sexual harm. Families, industry and wider society all have a role to play, and participants expressed a desire to see all such parties more actively engaged in efforts to tackle online sexual harm.

8.3 Conclusion

Although this was a small-scale study, its focus on the views of children and young people offers an important, often overlooked, contribution on how we might better protect children and young people from online-facilitated child sexual abuse. The children and young people who participated in the research have clearly articulated a desire for school-based education about online sexual harm and shared a series of helpful observations on how this might be better tailored to their real-life experiences and needs. Such messages, while critical for education, also hold relevance for society's wider messaging about online sexual harm and our wider efforts to protect children and young people from this.

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