

Growing Up in a Digital World: Recognising & Responding to Technology Assisted Harmful Sexual Behaviour

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Hierarchy of Needs (2023)?



Living in a digital world

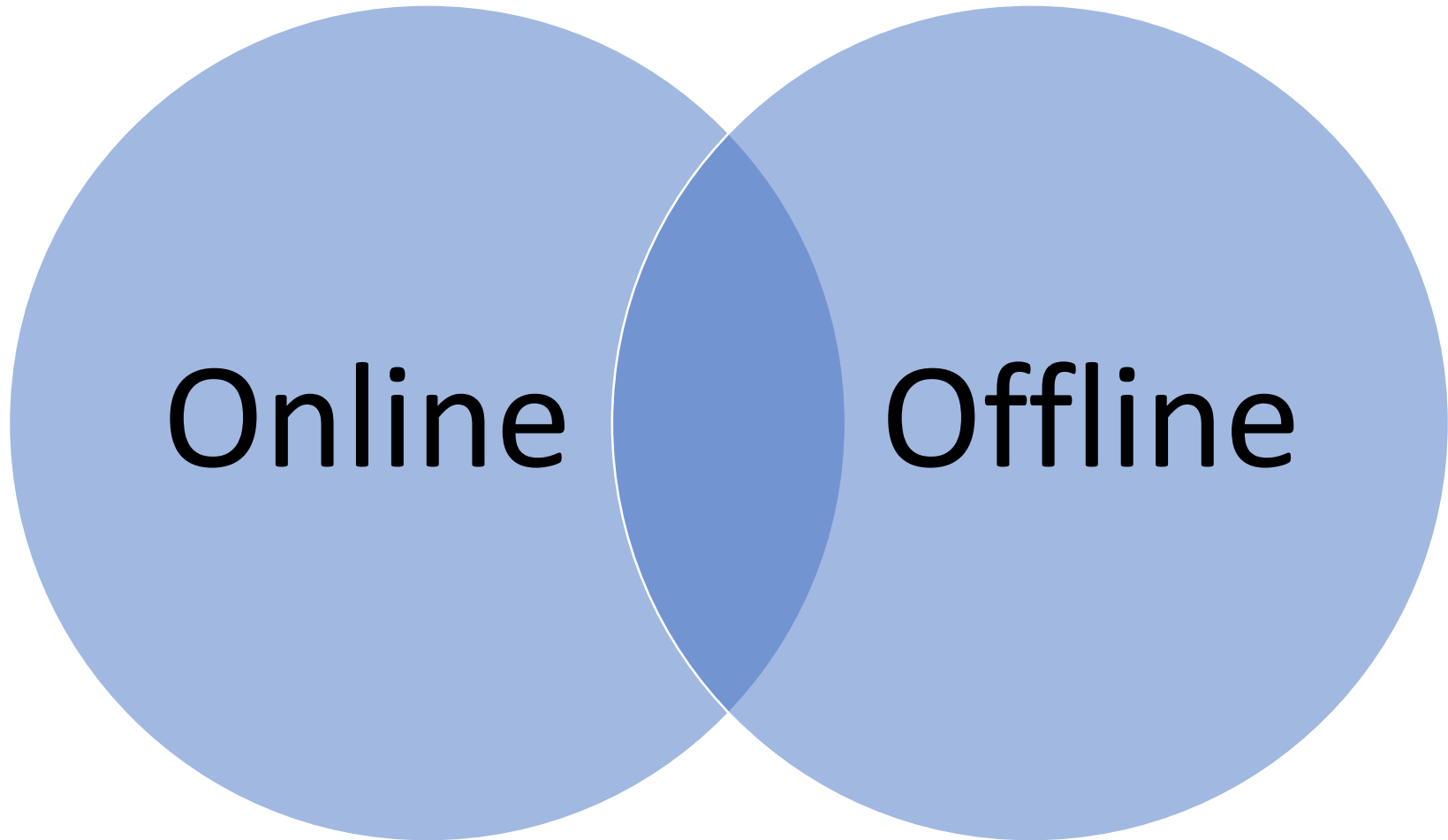
Technology is a key aspect of young people's lives and although technology can provide entertainment and connection, the digital world is a place where young people can be harmed, and cause harm.

Living in a digital world...

- Almost all children in the UK have access to the internet and various forms of communications technology: nine in 10 children own their own mobile phone by the age of **11** (Ofcom, 2022).
- While children are now ‘born into an online world’, and may appear more skilled than adults in using digital technology, this does not necessarily mean that they are equipped to navigate online environments safely (Livingstone et al, 2017).

Living in a digital world...

The majority of potentially harmful online sexual interactions occur on a wide range of 'open web' popular platforms including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts/Meet, TikTok, 'X' (formerly known as Twitter) and YouTube (Goharian et al, 2022).



Online

Offline

Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)

“No issue is more pressing for contemporary child protection than the role of the internet in facilitating child sexual abuse”. Professor Alexis Jay (2018)

“The serious threat of child sexual abuse facilitated by the internet is an urgent problem which cannot be overstated”.

Professor Alexis Jay (2020)

Children are vulnerable
to technology facilitated
harm

NSPCC Briefing (2022)

The briefing is based on case reviews published between 2015 and 2022, where online harm or abuse was a key factor.

In the case reviews, children had died or were seriously harmed in the following ways:

- Suicide following cyberbullying
- Suicide or serious harm after accessing harmful content online
- Online grooming leading to sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation (CSE)
- Children sexually abused in order to share images or videos online
- Contact child sexual abuse by perpetrators previously known to police for sharing child sexual abuse images online.

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) 2022 data

<https://www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/annual-report-2022/>

IWF 2022 data

375,230

Number of reports assessed by IWF in 2022

255,588

Number of reports confirmed to show child sexual abuse imagery in 2021

51,369

Number of Category A (the most severe) reports in 2022

137%

Rise in imagery featuring boys compared to previous year

IWF 2022 data

- 78% was 'self-generated' content
- 96% of images were girls
- 137% increase in images of boys
- 60% increase in 7-10 year olds

Digital Vulnerability

- **Audience** - the internet widens the audience of bystanders
- **Viral** - the internet can facilitate the rapid spread of harassment
- **Instant** - with mobile devices to hand it is easier to share something quickly without time to reflect
- **Evidence'** - digital content has a footprint and anything you do, say or share can endure online
- **Disinhibition** - the internet can enable people to act in ways they wouldn't in person

Digital Vulnerability

- **Fans and followers** - popularity matters on the internet
- **Digital empathy gap'** - digital communication can make it harder to understand other's emotions
- **Anonymity'** - opportunities for people to hide their identity or use an alternative identity
- **Constant communication'**- 24/7 communication is difficult to escape

(Project deSHAME, 2017)

Children are growing up in a digital world....

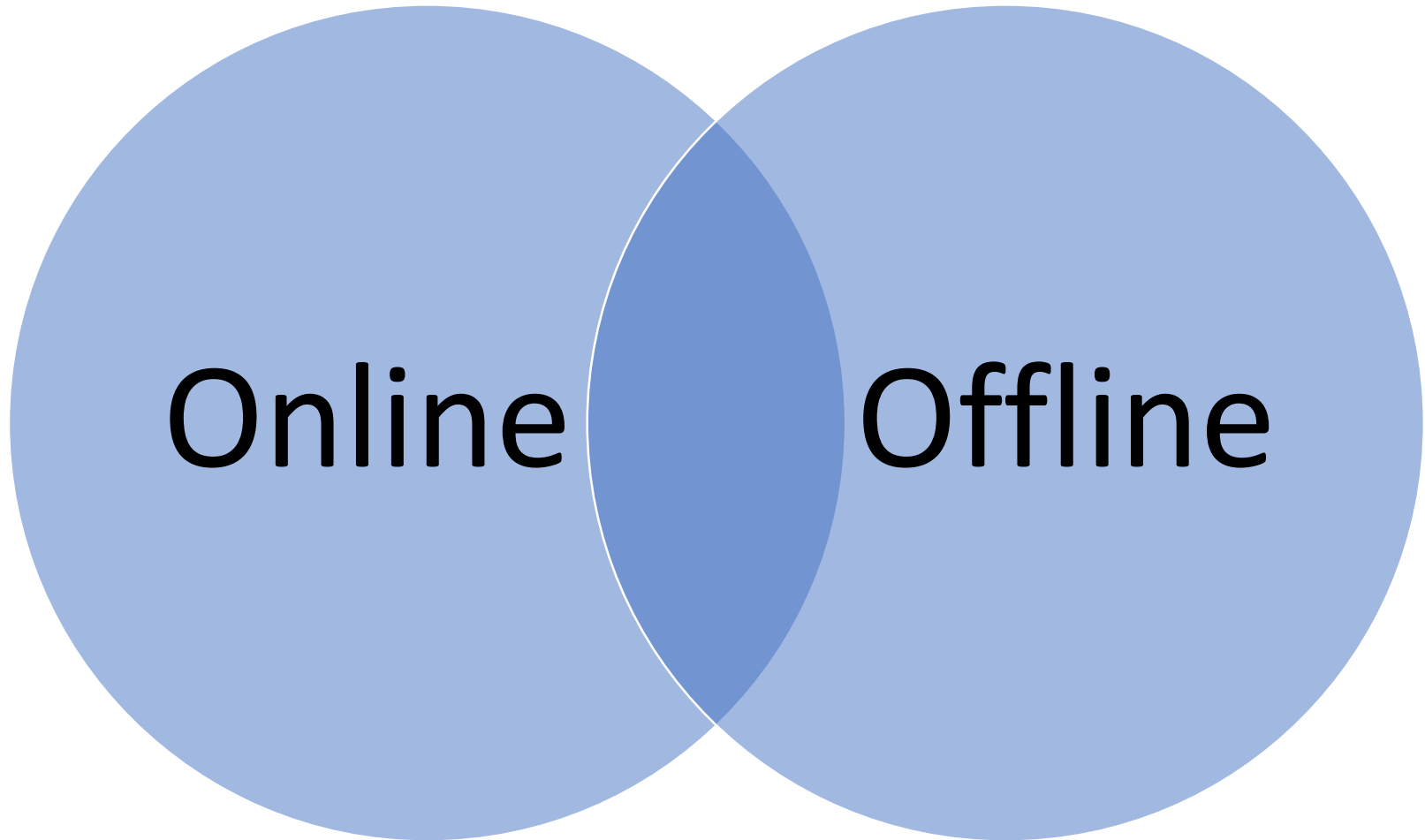
Asking about technology use should be an integral part of assessments and interventions with children and young people.



Recognising TA HSB

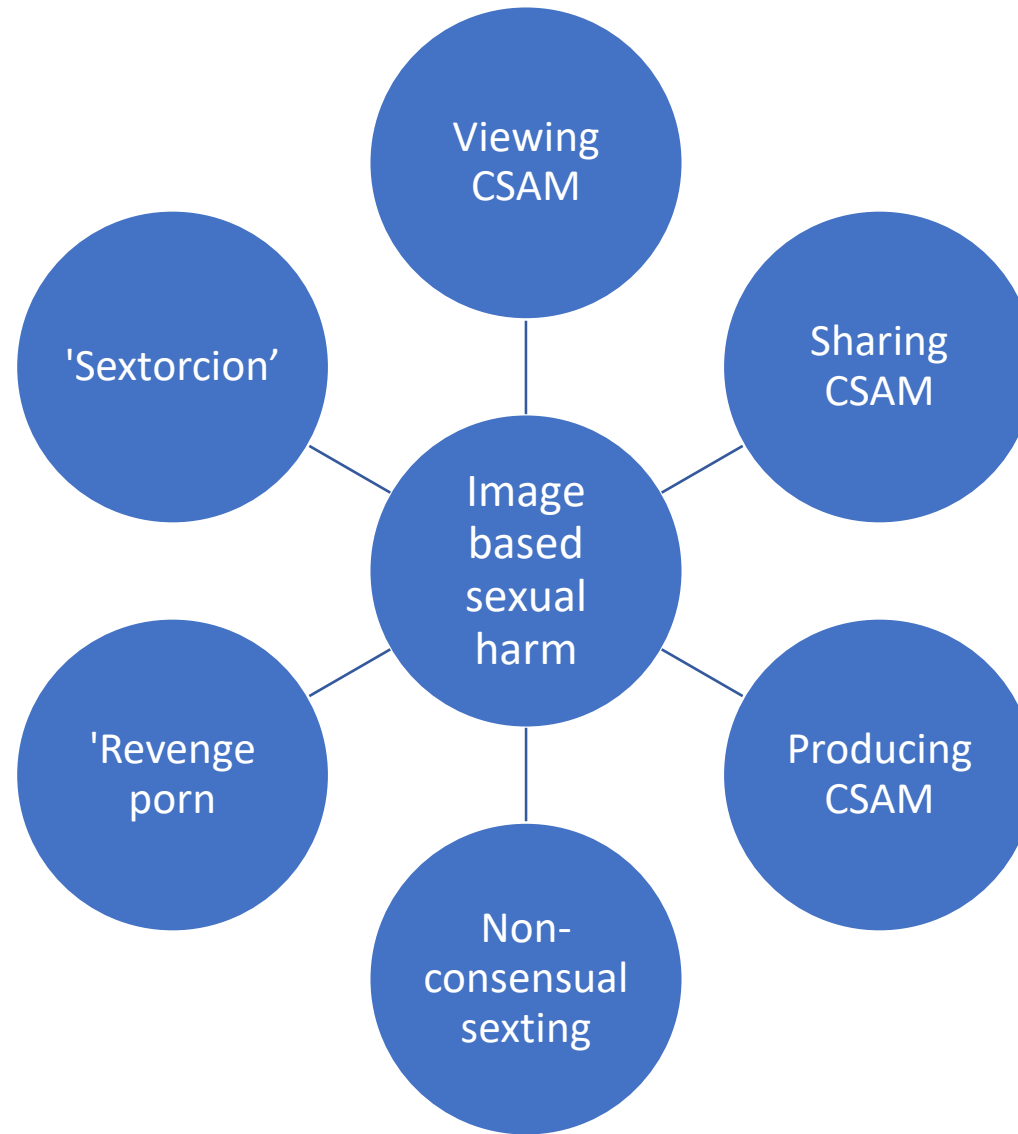
Sexual development

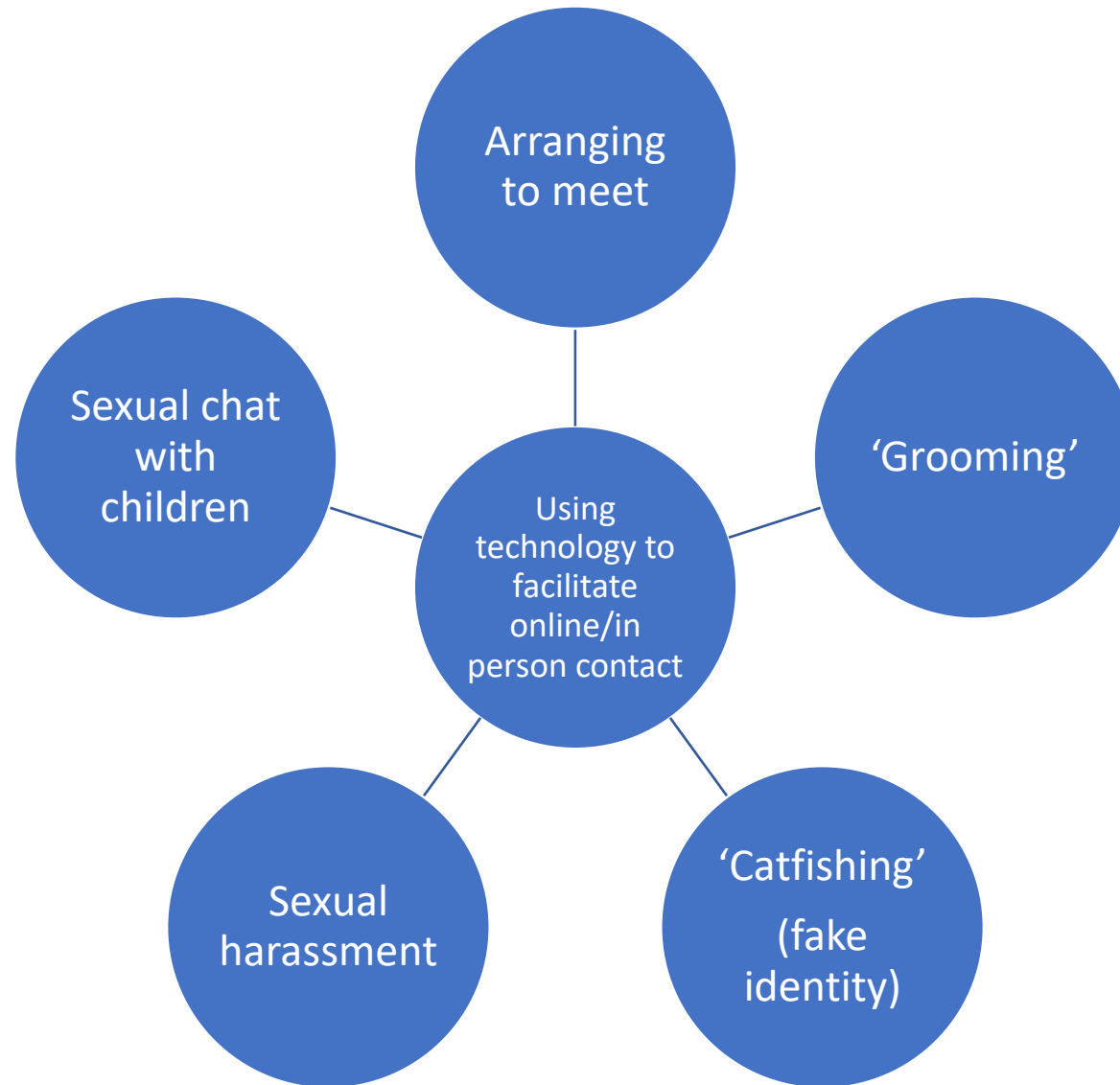
- Sexual behaviour exists on a continuum and young people are exploring their sexual thoughts, feelings and identity.
- As with other types of sexual behaviour, technology-assisted sexual behaviour could be considered:
 - Developmentally typical / normal
 - Problematic
 - Harmful
- Technology is an integral part of young people's relationships (McGeeney & Hanson, 2017).



Online

Offline





Characteristics

- The NSPCC literature review findings (Belton & Hollis, 2016) suggested that young people who viewed indecent images of children (IIOC) came from more stable backgrounds, had a better level of education, were less likely to have previous convictions and there was less evidence of antisocial behaviour (when compared to young people with 'offline' HSB).
- Some (small-scale) studies indicate that social isolation, social difficulties, and questioning sexual identity may be factors of relevance in TA HSB (Lewis, 2018).

Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) Project

- The ROSA Project provided a one-to-one service for children becoming involved in harmful behaviour online (n=61).
- Evaluated by Children and Young People's Centre for Justice.

Characteristics

- Of the children and young people that accessed the ROSA Project, 'maltreatment concerns' were present for 44%. This was primarily neglect or bullying (with bullying being both online and offline).
- 44% of the children & young people were reported to have a mental health issue, learning disorder or autism (diagnosed or suspected).

Characteristics

'There is a small, but growing, literature about a subset of IIOC offenders with developmental disorders in which their symptoms may intersect with their offending activities. Case Law, though, is inconsistent on whether the presence of such a disorder serves to mitigate culpability'. Hamilton (2022) – Scottish Sentencing Council

Marie Collins Foundation

https://www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk/assets/news_entry_featured_image/helping-my-autistic-child.pdf

Increased Vulnerabilities

- Children with special educational needs – this may be because their desire to maintain friendships, or difficulty in reflecting on the consequences of certain actions, makes it easier for others to take advantage of them (Revealing Reality, 2022b)
- Children who are depressed or experiencing mental health difficulties, those who are out of school, and those from poorer households and/or marginalised groups (UNICEF, 2017)
- Lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, and those identifying as transgender or questioning/queer, who may go online to try to understand their sexual orientation or gender identity and connect with people like them (Goharian et al, 2022; UNICEF, 2017; Setter et al, 2021)
- Lonely or socially isolated children, who may spend more time online as they seek friendship and acceptance (Katz and El Asam, 2020; Livingstone et al, 2017; Revealing Reality, 2022b).

Increased Vulnerabilities (Revealing Reality, 2022)

What increased vulnerability:

- **Children whose parents or carers were less engaged with what they were doing online were more at risk of experiencing harm**
- **Children whose parents had low online media literacy appeared at greater risk of exposure to harm**
- **Younger children were often less aware of what could cause them harm online**
- **Children with special educational needs and disabilities were additionally vulnerable online**
 - Some children who had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) had experienced online harm which appeared to have been exacerbated or made more likely due to their additional vulnerabilities.
 - This included them being taken advantage of because of their desire to maintain friendships, or challenges with reflecting on the consequences of certain actions.

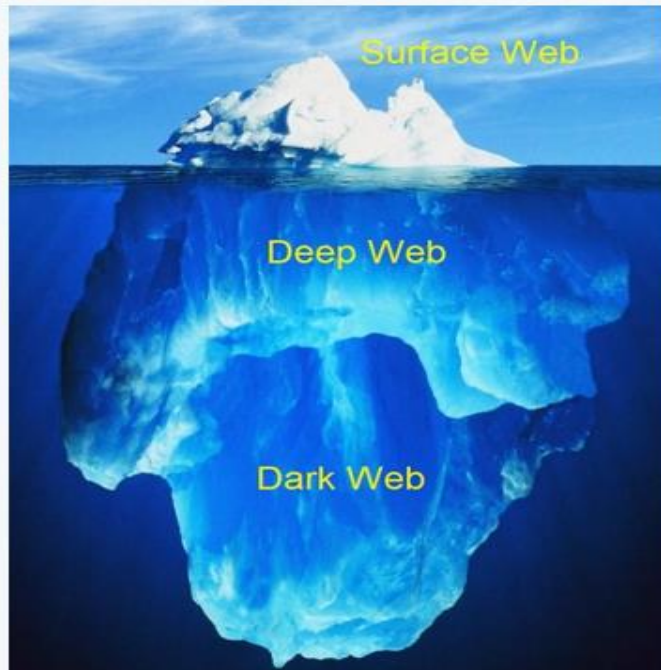
Autism

- Allely (2020) – range of vulnerabilities which may be relevant for those with autism involved in TA HSB:
 - ‘Counterfeit deviance’ (naive unbridled curiosity)
 - Social maturity
 - Literal thinking
 - Impaired theory of mind (ToM)
 - Impaired ability to correctly guess age
 - Impaired ability to recognise negative facial expressions
 - Ritualistic nature of collecting

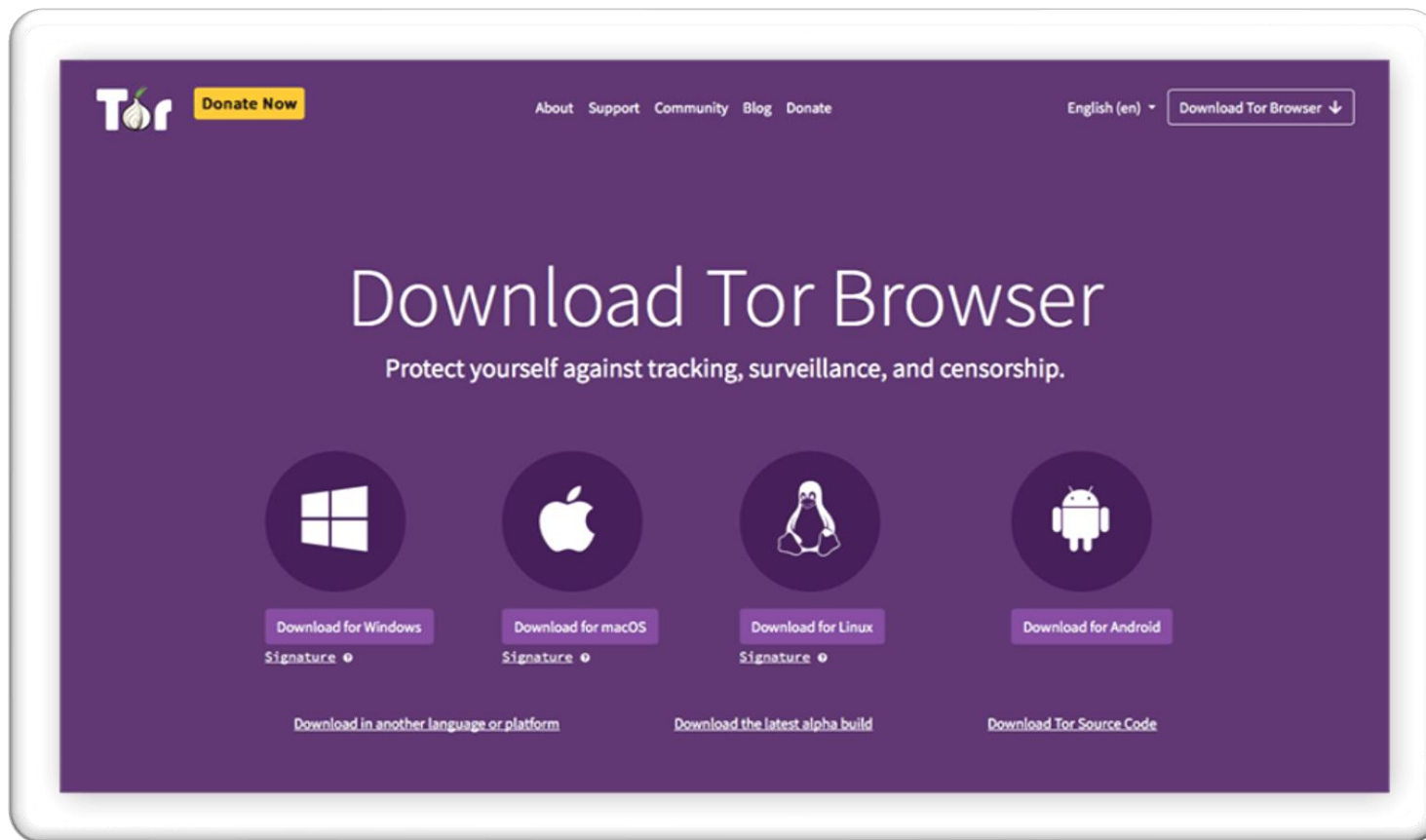
Dark Web

Dark Web

Surface Web, Deep Web and Dark Web



- **Surface Web** is the portion of the web readily available to the general public and searchable with standard web search engines
- **Deep Web** is the portion whose contents are not indexed by standard web search engines
- **Dark Web** is a layer of information and pages that you can only get access to through 'overlay networks' which obscure public access and are hosted anonymously.



- A survey of dark web users searching for child sexual abuse material found that 70% had first been exposed to such material under 18, and 1/3 had attempted to make online contact with children (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaranen- Valkonen, 2021).

Dark Web

- If a young person has accessed the Dark Web, this is not necessarily to access sexual content – also be conscious of issues such as:
 - Uncensored political / religious ideology and the potential for radicalisation
 - Hacking
 - Access to weapons
 - Access to illegal substances
 - Suicide / self-harm sites

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/our-views/the-dark-web/>

Dark Web

- If a young person is accessing the dark web, explore their reason for this
- May have begun with curiosity – adolescents are drawn to risk taking behaviour
- Extreme sexual content exists on the dark web, including, pictures, videos, live streamed sexual abuse, forums, groups, trading images etc
- Consider the young persons own vulnerability if they have been accessing the dark web – have they been in contact with other young people / adults?
- Consider the potential for a trauma response to what they may have seen
- Has the young person got neurodevelopmental difficulties? Consider the impact of these

Why a young person with autism may have increased vulnerability to dark web use...

- Restricted interests – a need to explore ‘everything’ about their area of interest. The interest can become ‘fixed’ / ‘obsessive’ and may feel compulsive.
- May struggle to see the ‘bigger picture’ of what they are looking at due to focus on the detail / difficulties in understanding the social context.

Pornography

It's Time We Talked(.com)

'Pornography is now the most prominent sexuality educator for many young people. Most young people discover porn well before they encounter sex – perhaps even before they have kissed or held a partner.'

[Resources](#) >

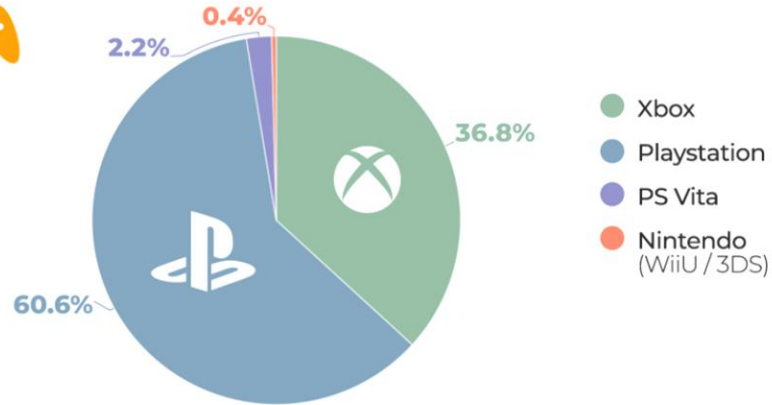
'A lot of it is actually just abuse'- Young people and pornography

31 January 2023

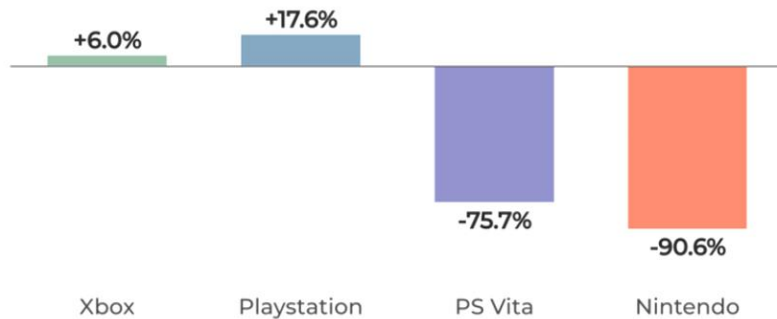


Report

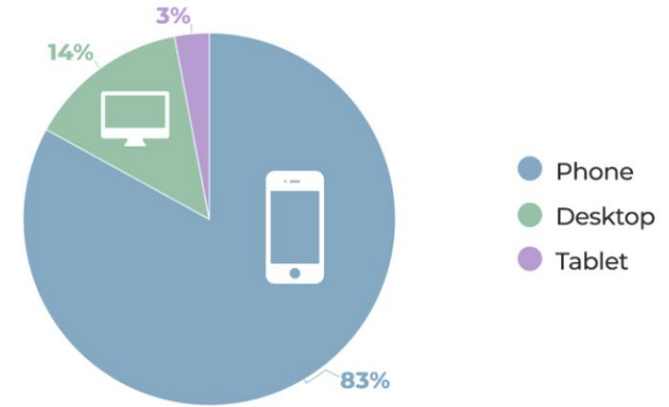
Traffic by Game Console



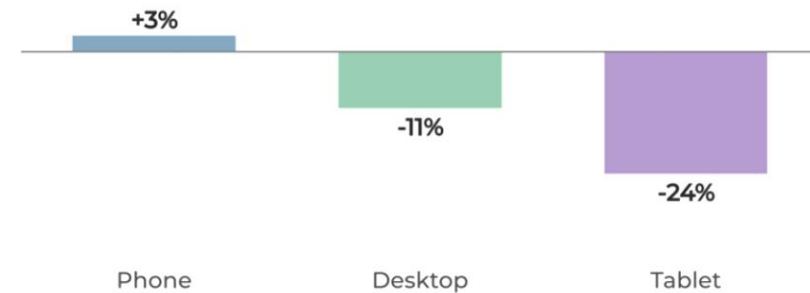
Change in Console Traffic Share from 2020 to 2021



Traffic by Phone, Desktop & Tablet



Change in Traffic Share from 2020 to 2021



Pornography

- The likelihood of accessing extreme or illegal pornography and/or Indecent Images of Children (IIOC), increases with the frequency with which online pornography is accessed (Belton & Hollis, 2016).
- There is evidence that viewing online pornography can influence young people's sexual behaviour and attitudes. Viewing extreme/illegal pornography has been found to influence sexually coercive behaviour (Belton & Hollis, 2016; Massey, 2021).

Pornography / Media

- The extent of impact is linked to factors such as the young person's support network, social learning and other demographic factors, not least gender which has been consistently found to be significant (Massey, 2021).
- Results from 59 studies, indicated that exposure to non-explicit sexual media is associated with both sexual attitudes and behaviour, particularly during adolescence (Coyne et al, 2019).

Pornography

Study of 4009 heterosexual scenes from Pornhub and Xvideos (Fritz et al 2020)

- **45%** of Pornhub scenes included at least one act of physical aggression
- **35%** of scenes from Xvideos contained aggression.
- Spanking, gagging, slapping, hair pulling, and choking were the five most common forms of physical aggression.
- Women were the target of the aggression in 97% of the scenes, and their response to aggression was either neutral or positive and rarely negative.

Study of 415 scenes within gay pornography (Fritz & Bowling, 2022)

- Sexual aggression occurred in **31%** of scenes.

Pornography

- Adolescents are less able to counterbalance what they have seen in such images/videos with healthy sexual experience and so should be seen as more susceptible to what they are viewing.
- Increased impact if also exposed to domestic abuse / sexual harm 'offline'?

Why a young person with autism may have increased vulnerability to problematic pornography use....

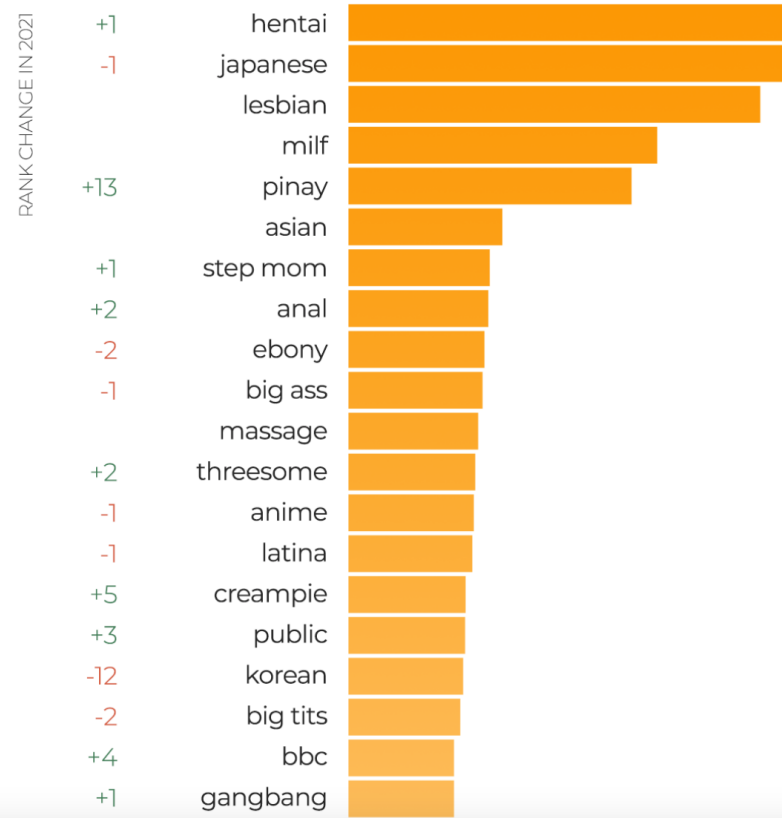
- Pornography could become an area of restricted interest and so frequency / content could become problematic or harmful.
- Content may become extreme due to difficulties recognising social context OR due to actively seeking images that are taboo / have a 'shock value'.
- Autism may lead to a richer internal / fantasy world, but there may be impaired social imagination.
- 'Collecting' may become an issue.
- 'Desensitisation' to child sexual abuse material (CSAM)

Anime, Manga & Hentai



- In Japan the term **anime** is used to refer to all animation, much like cartoon is in English.
- Manga are comic books rather than animations.
- Hentai is the sexualised version of these images.

Most Searched for Terms of 2021



Hentai

- If what is depicted would be illegal – this would be an illegal image in the UK & in Norway

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- The most convincing AI child sexual abuse imagery would even be difficult for our trained analysts to distinguish from actual photographs (IWF, 2023).
- Most AI child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is now so realistic that it fits the criteria to be assessed as 'pseudo-photograph of a child'.

Increased vulnerability to cartoon / AI images...

- Literal thinking – the images are ‘not real’ so how could they be harmful?
- Vulnerability to being influenced by others (e.g. images being shared as a ‘joke’).
- Fixation on rules – the rule is not to hurt people but this does not hurt people (need to help **‘re-write the rule book’**)

'Sexting'

Youth Produced Sexual Images
'Nudes'

Sexting

- Consensual sexting is characterised by sharing sexual content through sending, receiving, or forwarding messages, photos, or videos via electronic devices. – Also referred to as 'self-generated content' and 'youth produced images'.
- The growing literature shows sexting to be complicated, and not necessarily always victimising. (WHO, 2022).
- When used without the consent from one of those involved, it is considered 'non-consensual sexting'.

Sexting

Contexts of non-consensual sexting:

1. Sexual images taken or obtained by other youth without consent or through coercion, pressure, deception or stealth.
2. Images consensually obtained, but then shared with others or posted without consent.
3. Sexual images are consensually obtained and then used to humiliate, denigrate, threaten or extort money, favours or additional sexual images, what is termed sextortion or sexual extortion .

*Romantic relationships that end acrimoniously are often a context for these non-consensual sexting and sextortion episodes.

Sexting

- Meta-analysis conducted to understand the sexting prevalence and trends of teens found that approximately **one in five** adolescents send, **one in three** receive, and **one in seven** forward sexts without consent (Mori et al., 2021).
- There were associations between adolescents with experiences of childhood trauma (e.g., neglect, physical, and sexual abuse) and non-consensual sexting (Barroso et al., 2022).

Increased vulnerability to problematic sexting...

- May be drawn to online communication due to social skills difficulties / loneliness.
- May struggle with social rules ('unwritten rules')
- An autistic young person may lack 'Theory of Mind' and so struggle to recognise the impact on another person.
- Could be linked to rejection sensitivity (perceived or real rejection) - use of an online way to seek 'revenge'.

Responding to TA HSB

Prevention – (World Health Organisation 2022)

Recommended implementing school-based educational programmes with multiple sessions, promoting interaction among young people and engaging parents. Highlighted the need for improvements in various areas including:

- More violence prevention programmes that combine content about online and offline dangers due to the overlap of these problems.
- Less emphasis on stranger danger as strangers are not the sole, or even the predominant offenders, in online violence against children.
- More emphasis on acquaintance and peer perpetrators, who are responsible for a majority of offenses.
- More attention to healthy relationship skills, since romance and intimacy-seeking are major sources of vulnerability to online violence.

Prevention

Education programmes to prevent harmful sexual behaviour by children can be effective, but they need to:

- Involve the school and the wider community
- Include different approaches
- Involve repeated reminders and follow-ups
- Actively engage children

Prevention

Marie Collins Foundation

https://www.mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk/assets/news_entry_featured_image/helping-my-autistic-child.pdf

Response where TA HSB has occurred

- Safeguarding response (police, children's social care etc)
- Safety planning
- Assessment (Practice Guidance and training available from AIM)
- Formulation
- Intervention

Safety Plans

- Simply restricting or limiting children's access to devices will not be effective, as this can make them feel isolated, different from their peers
- Child may have more knowledge and skill than the parent
- Age of the child
- Child's right to privacy
- Impact of restricted technology use on child's life

Safety Plans

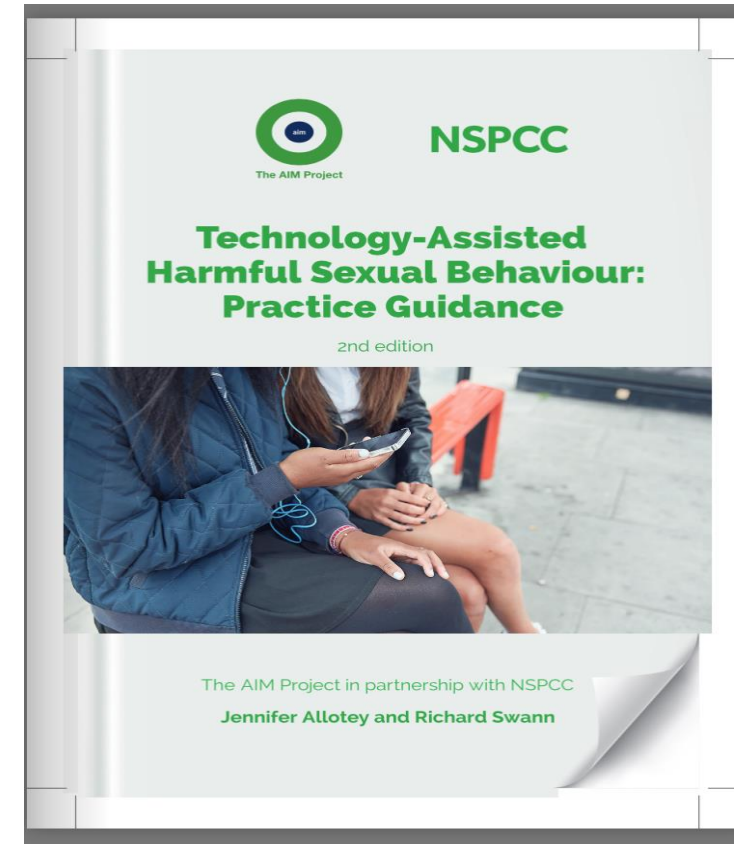
- Proportionate – what is the risk being managed?
- Parental controls
- What is being restricted and does this manage risk?
- Who will supervise / monitor?
- What can be safely accessed by the young person?
- Review
- Involvement of young person

Educate the adults!

- Who knows more – the children or the adults around them (parents/carers/professionals)?
- What do the adults need to supervise and understand their child's technology use?

Assessment

- Assessment of the behaviour is needed to understand the function of it.
- What is the behaviour?
- Are there other behaviours of concern?
- What else is known about the young person:
 - Development
 - Life experiences
 - Family
 - Environment



Formulation

- How can the young person's life experiences help us understand the behaviour?
- **What was the function of the behaviour?**
- What needs was the behaviour meeting?
- What will help the behaviour to stop?
- What will increase the risk of repeat behaviour?

Intervention

- What needs to happen to reduce risk?
- What does the young person need?
- What does the family need?

- Don't jump to 'online safety' work – the young person often has more knowledge of technology than the person doing the intervention.
- Have you assessed that there is a lack of knowledge, and that this was linked to the behaviour?

Autism /Learning Disability

- Do assessments / interventions need adapting?
- We need to see the world as the young person views it. In order to help them, we need to understand them.
- Avoid only viewing the behaviour through a neurotypical lens....

Future Challenges.....

- Adapting the way we work to understand the internal world of those with autism / learning disability. Until we understand the function of the behaviour, it will be difficult to deliver the right intervention....
- Technology challenges (Artificial Intelligence etc....)

Questions, comments or reflections?



Report Child Abuse Imagery

Via online Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) report portal

Children / young people can report image of themselves via 'Report Remove' (IWF and Childline)

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