Learning about online sexual harm

# Details

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## Topics

Risks and harms

## Sample

• Survey: 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; 45 young people (aged 14–16 years; 67 percent female and 33 percent male), undertaken in three of the secondary state school settings.
• Interviews: 9 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.

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

## Implications For Educators About

Digital citizenship

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Fighting against child sexual abuse and child exploitation

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Industry

# Abstract

Executive summary
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. Exposure to risk of online sexual harm is a common experience; children and young people need access to education that addresses this before spending unsupervised 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
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 avoidancebased 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.

# Outcome

See abstract