Online communications

Qualitative research exploring experiences of sexualised messages online among children

November 2024 Report

Ipsos UK

Contents

Acknowledgements

Content warning

WARNING: **This report contains distressing discussions of children and young people's experiences with receiving sexualised messages online from known adults or perceived adults[1] that were of an unknown age.**

If you find anything in this report distressing and would like to speak to someone or seek support, or if you or someone you know has been affected by or experienced receiving sexualised messages online, please consider seeking help from the following resources:

The Marie Collins Foundation (for everyone)

Phone: 01765 688 827

Samaritans (for everyone)

Phone: 116 123 (free 24/7 helpline)

Childline (for young people under 19)

Phone: 0800 1111 (24/7 helpline)

The Mix (for young people under 25)

Phone: 0808 808 4994

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

Phone: 0800 58 58 58 (5pm to midnight every day)

SHOUT (for everyone)

Text: text 'Shout' to 85258 (free support 24/7)

In an emergency do not be afraid to dial 999

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[1] Participants could not always say the exact age of who they were engaging with, we use this wording to take that into account as some users the participants were speaking to may not have been 18+.

Ofcom foreword

This report explores children's[2] experiences of receiving and replying to sexualised messages online from a variety of perspectives i.e. children themselves, young adults reflecting on their experiences as a child and professionals currently supporting children. It explores the pathways of how children are exposed to these messages, factors that may influence their decision making, and the actions they may take in response on an online service e.g. they may decide to block or report the user.

Ofcom is the independent regulator for communications services in the UK and has statutory duties in relation to media literacy and online safety. The Online Safety Act 2023 ('the Act') includes the requirement for online services in scope to have systems and processes in place to identify, mitigate and manage risks of harm to users.

The Act requires online services to mitigate risks in relation to a range of priority offences (which are set and defined by Parliament) of which includes Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA), including online grooming. Online grooming for child sexual abuse is defined as "the method of contacting children and developing a relationship, whether through flattery, emotional connection, sexualisation, bribery, blackmail or coercion, for the purposes of conducting child sexual abuse."[3] Research highlights that online grooming is significantly under-reported by victims for many reasons including shame, fear, and the lack of recognition of the crime by some of those who experience it.[4] While it is not possible to accurately determine the scale of online grooming, it is understood that it is "of significant concern".[5]

This research was commissioned while the Online Safety Bill was progressing through the parliamentary process, to collect more information on the pathways and children's experiences of online grooming in preparation for Ofcom's new statutory powers under the Act. More specifically, Ofcom was interested in understanding more about the online service functionalities involved in online grooming, e.g., how contact is made with a child, how children and perpetrators move across services and how it sometimes ends in physical contact. These findings are important in furthering the evidence base for Ofcom's online safety regulatory duties.

Fieldwork was conducted between June 2023 and March 2024 and consisted of11 in-depth interviews with children and young adults (aged 14-24) with experience of sexualised messages online; 1 interview with parents of a child that had experienced online grooming; and 9 in-depth interviews with professionals working with children and young adults who have experienced receiving these messages online.

The report includes participants' experiences and perceptions of various online service functionalities, including potential safety measures or features. Participants' suggestions of what should be improved have not been assessed by the research team and their inclusion in this report should not be seen as validation of technical feasibility, proportionality, or effectiveness. Statements about participants' experiences have not been factually verified to ensure they provide an accurate reflection of the functionalities or safety processes deployed by the online services mentioned by participants.

This research was commissioned to build Ofcom's evidence base regarding online grooming of children. The findings reflect the perceptions of children, young adults, parents, and

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[2] During interviews, those 18+ reflected on their experiences from when they were a child. As such, all findings reflected in this report relate to the experiences of children. For brevity, where relevant, we refer to children and young people throughout this report as 'young people'.

[3] Ofcom, 2023. Illegal harms consultation, volume 2, paragraph 6C.34.

[4] Quayle, E., Jonsson, L., Lööf, L., 2012. Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse. Interviews with affected young people. Council of the Baltic Sea States, Stockholm: ROBERT project. [accessed 31 August 2023]; Katz, C., Piller, S., Glucklich, T., & Matty, D. E., 2021. "Stop Waking the Dead": Internet Child Sexual Abuse and Perspectives on Its Disclosure. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36(9–10), NP5084–NP5104.

[5] Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2020. The Internet: Investigation Report.

professionals interviewed, not Ofcom or Ipsos. They should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt as part of our role as the online safety regulator.

Important context and interpretation

This report contains discussion of **distressing themes** regarding children and young people's experiences of receiving and replying to sexualised messages (from adults or perceived adults) online.

We interviewed children and young people aged 14 to 24 with experiences of receiving sexualised messages from adults, or perceived adults, online. During interviews, those 18+ reflected on their experiences from when they were a child. As such, all findings reflected in this report relate to the experiences of children. For brevity, where relevant, we refer to children and young people throughout this report as 'young people'. We also interviewed professionals who have worked with children and young people who have experienced receiving these messages online. These include staff from charities working with young people and safeguarding officers within schools. For brevity, we refer to all those we interviewed because of their work with young people and children as 'professionals', and when we refer to one group or the other, this has been clarified in the report where relevant.

In the interviews with children and young adults, the terminology used to ask about their experiences were referred to as "potentially uncomfortable sexualised messages". For brevity within this report, we refer to these messages as "sexualised messages".

Specific online services are referenced throughout the report reflecting the participants' views and experiences. This should not be interpreted as an indication of the prevalence of online grooming on particular online services, but rather indicative of the online services used by those taking part in the research and their experiences.

Finally, findings in sections 3, 4 and 6 are largely based on insights from children and young adults rather than from professionals, as we wanted to collect individual anecdotal experiences and professionals were not necessarily best placed to reflect on personal insights and experiences of young people.

Definitions

The table below sets out definitions of key terms that are used throughout the report.

Young people	For brevity, where relevant, we refer to children and young adults throughout this report as 'young people'
Child	An individual who is under the age of 18.
Young adult	An individual who is aged between 18 and 24.
Sexualised messages	Messages received by a child that contains discussions about nudity or sexual suggestions, requests nude or semi-nude images to be sent by the child or contains nude or semi-nude images or videos or links to nude or sexual images or videos.
Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)	Developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive.[6]
Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA)	Offences relating to the making, showing, distribution or possession of an indecent image or film of a child which may be linked to or directing a user to CSAM.[7]
Online grooming	The method of contacting children and developing a relationship, whether through flattery, emotional connection, sexualisation, bribery, blackmail, or coercion.[8] For the purposes of this report, references to online grooming are those activities carried out for the purposes of sexual abuse of a child only.
Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)	Material which depicts sexual activity or other illegal imagery of children.[9] It can also be non-image based and can include material which contains advice about grooming or abusing a child sexually.

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[6] NSPCC learning, https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/harmful-sexual-behaviour. Hackett, S, 2014. Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours. London: Research in Practice.

[7] Ofcom, 2023. Illegal harms consultation, volume 2.

[8] Ofcom, 2023. Illegal harms consultation, volume 2. See chapter 6C, 'Grooming', for more details.

[9] Crown Prosecution Service, 2020. Indecent and Prohibited Images of Children.

Executive summary

Background and context

Ipsos UK, with support from Professor Julia Davidson and Dr Anna Gekoski, was commissioned by Ofcom to explore children's experiences of receiving and replying to sexualised messages online. This research aimed to:

- Gain an understanding of the pathways of how children are exposed to these messages.
- Explore factors that may influence children's decision making.
- Gather information on children's responses to receiving sexualised messages on an online service e.g. they may decide to block or report the user.

Fieldwork was conducted between June 2023 and March 2024, consisted of 11 in-depth interviews with children and young adults (aged 14-24) with experience of receiving sexualised messages online; 1 interview with parents of a child that had experienced online grooming; and 9 in-depth interviews with professionals working with children and young adults who have experienced receiving these messages online.

As noted above, the sample included young adults aged 18+ who were asked to reflect on their experiences as a child. For brevity we refer to the sample of both children and young adults as 'young people'.

Key findings

Definitions of what constituted a 'stranger', or an 'adult' varied. The widespread use of online services has shifted the way in which young people conceptualise strangers. Although they were more likely to accept connections on social media from people they knew from offline interactions, they did mention accepting people they did not know in some cases. Young people did not always consider people they had mutual online connections with but did not know personally as 'strangers'. There was also a perception that people aged 18 or 19 were not 'adults', whereas those in their 20s and older were. Some young people suggested that they would be more likely to accept connections and interact with those they thought were younger, including those aged around 18 and 19.

Receiving sexualised messages

Receiving sexualised messages was not deemed unusual among the young people included in this research. Young people noted that they personally had multiple experiences of receiving sexualised messages (when they were a child[10]), and that this was also common amongst their friends.

Young people reflected on a range of types of messages that they felt were uncomfortable and sexualised. These included: receiving nude images at any stage in the conversation; receiving requests to send photos from pictures of their face through to nude images; use of known slang to check whether they would send images, such as "do you send?" and "WYLL" (what you look like) and being asked to meet the adult/perceived adult in person.

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[10] Among the young adults included in the sample

Common pathways in which young people received uncomfortable sexualised messages online can be classified in two broad categories: messages from those with no mutual connections and messages from those with mutual connections.

Young people who received sexualised messages from adults or perceived adults with no mutual connections often said this communication felt uncomfortable with the first message or interaction being sexualised or explicit, such as receiving images or requests to send images.

Those who had mutual online connections with individuals often referred to the initial content of conversations as "normal" or "non-sexual" and were viewed as age appropriate. Following this rapport-building, young people then said they had received sexual content including sexualised messages and images or videos.

Certain functionalities were also seen to influence the likelihood of a child receiving sexualised messages online. Functionalities that were highlighted as playing a role in the likelihood of receiving sexualised messages included: ability to send direct messages to individuals; a quick add[11] function which was perceived to make it easier for adults or perceived adults to connect and send messages to children; and features allowing anonymity, making it harder for young people to get a sense of who a user is.

<u>**Responding to sexualised messages**</u>

Multiple factors emerged that seem to influence the likelihood of responding to sexualised communications online.

- **Do they have mutual connections?** Where a young person had any number of mutual connections with someone online, they were more likely to engage with them. This could be a mutual connection with someone they did not know very well and/or someone who the mutual connection had not met offline.

- **Is the message immediately explicit?** A young person was less likely to reply where an exchange online was immediately sexually explicit or uncomfortable. They were more likely to reply where there was more personalised, friendly communication before the sexual content started, at which point further contextual factors impacted the young person's response.

- **Is the message perceived to be from a younger or older adult?** Young people responded differently towards messages from perceived younger adults than older adults. They stated that they were more likely to want to impress those that they perceived to be younger adults and wanted to appear mature. As a result, they said they were more likely to engage with them.

- **Are they from an 'at risk' demographic group?** Children who were 'looked after' and children with special educational needs and disabilities[12] (SEND) were perceived by professionals within charities to be at higher risk of engaging and responding to messages due to their increased

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[11] Described in Ofcom, 2022, <u>Research into risk factors that may lead children to harm online</u> as 'a feature of a video-sharing platform that enables users to easily add new connections based on 'friend of friend' networks, location or being within the same group chat.'

[12] We acknowledge other terms may be used to refer to this group.

potential for social isolation and a perception that these groups tended to have a stronger desire to make connections online.

- **Have they previously had adverse childhood experiences or previous mental health challenges?** Professionals within charities felt that children who, for example, had previously been victims of sexual abuse or harassment were at higher risk of engaging with and responding to sexualised messages. Further, they considered those with low self-esteem or body image issues could have increased vulnerability to flattering messages from adults, and that children from these groups should be a particular focus when considering online safety.

Impact of receiving sexualised messages

While the impact on young people varied substantially by individual case, there were some patterns identified. Young people who regularly received sexualised messages said they had become desensitised to receiving them. However, in instances where young people had responded to users who sent sexualised messages (as a child), or it became personalised and prolonged, the impacts became more pronounced.

One of the most consistent impacts noted by the young people we spoke to was, the **feeling of shame**, and in some cases **self-blame**, that came with receiving and engaging with these messages. This was commonly coupled with existing feelings of **isolation** which could then **lead to higher vulnerability** of engaging further with sexualised conversations.

More broadly, **mental health was perceived to suffer** as a result of online grooming. Professionals mentioned anxiety and depression, as well as disordered eating, as common impacts. The responses of relevant authorities to mental health concerns were not perceived to be adequate.

Reactions to sexualised messages

Young people were more likely to tell their friends about uncomfortable sexualised messages if they were with their friends at the time of receiving the message. Those who had told friends about this type of message were often told by peers that they had received similar types of messages, and a common reaction was to 'laugh' and 'joke' about the messages. While it was seen to be common to receive these types of messages, it was still viewed as inappropriate.

It was **less common among young people to tell their parents about these types of messages**, often citing it felt too awkward or uncomfortable. For those who did tell their parents, this was often the next step after telling friends, and there was often a time lag between the incident and telling their parents.

Reporting an incident, either to an online service or by telling another person about it, was inconsistent among the young people spoken to in this research. They said they were less likely to report incidents that were immediately sexual (such as receiving an image from an unknown account) as many were desensitised to these and perceived there to be limited benefits in submitting a report. They were also less likely to report someone they felt they knew well, this resulted from social pressures among peers to appear relaxed about communications from others and to appear 'mature' for their age. Young people also felt that the nature of time-limited messages, where a message is automatically deleted after a certain timeframe, makes it more difficult to show these messages to adults.

Blocking a user was the most common action used by young people and they said this was often straightforward to do. On the other hand, they described reporting processes as inconsistent across online services, making this action less straightforward in some cases, reducing the likelihood of reporting. Where young people mentioned positive experiences of reporting processes, online services had: the option to report via a clear and visible icon; the option to report within the chat rather than via their profile; and not having set criteria or reasons for making the report.

Improving online safety for children

Both professionals and young people put forward recommendations on how online services and educational methods could be improved to ensure better safety for children online.

Recommendations for online services	Recommendations for educational methods
Introduce effective age verification across all online services.	Ensure awareness and online safety education happens in all schools, including primary schools.
Newly created (child) accounts should be set as private by default, including location settings.	Ensure education is not only provided to children but also provided to parents and other responsible adults including teachers so they can better understand the nuances of online interactions to better engage with children on the topic.
Children should only receive messages from individuals they had accepted as a connection.	Dismantle the narrative that it's normal to receive sexualised messages online.
More effective parental controls for users under 18, such as requiring children's accounts to have a parent or guardian's contact linked to it.	
Online service design needs to be focused on being child-friendly and safe, such as having easy and clear blocking and report mechanisms and educational materials.	

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and context

Online activity among children is high: 96% of children aged 3-17 went online at some point in 2023,[13] and 93% of 10–15-year-olds were doing so almost daily.[14] The majority (81%) of 8–17-year-olds are using social media for things such as following friends and people they like, and for reading, liking and sharing content.[15] While almost all children (99%) aged 12-17 see the benefits of being online, the online space is also a risky environment for children.[16]

The evidence base suggests a growing issue around online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) reported 255,571 URLS were confirmed as containing child sexual abuse material (CSAM),[17] a 717% increase from 31,266 in 2014[18] (although it is expected that some of this rise can in part be explained by better technology to discover these images).

Just under 1 in 10 children (9.5%) aged 13-15 reported receiving a sexualised message in 2022-23, with over three quarters of these receiving more than one such message. Most of these messages (78.9%) were received through social media.[19] Alongside this, online grooming crimes recorded by the police have increased by 82% in the last five years.[20]

This upward trajectory in online CSEA was partly boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw increased opportunities for perpetrators to contact children.[21] The way CSAM is created has also evolved. For example, there has been a steep increase in recent years in the proportion of material being 'self-generated' using smartphones or webcams and shared online.[22] Furthermore, online grooming is increasingly becoming a cross-service problem, with police recording 150 different apps and games involved in grooming crimes in the year 2022/23.[23]

Within this context, Ofcom commissioned Ipsos UK, with support from Professor Julia Davidson and Dr Anna Gekoski, to conduct research into children's experiences of receiving and replying to sexualised

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[13] Ofcom, 2024, Children's Media Use and Attitudes Report 2024.

[14] Office of National Statistics, 2024, Bullying and Online experiences among children in England and Wales: year ending March 2023.

[15] Ofcom, 2024, Children's Media Use and Attitudes Report 2024.

[16] Ofcom, 2024, Children's Media Use and Attitudes Report 2024.

[17] Internet Watch Foundation, 2022, IWF Annual Report.

[18] Internet Watch Foundation, 2014, IWF Annual Report.

[19] Office of National Statistics, 2024, Bullying and Online experiences among children in England and Wales: year ending March 2023.

[20] In 2022/23, there were 6,350 Sexual Communication with a Child offences, with almost 120 offences occurring per week on average. Source: Freedom of Information data requested by NSPCC.

[21] This research found that lockdowns associated with the pandemic provided more opportunities to perpetrators to contact children (due to being online at home more) and more opportunities for children to be contacted online (as a result of school closures). Lockdowns were also found to heighten risk factors for abuse. Source: WeProtect Alliance, 2021, Global Threat Assessment 2021.

[22] IWF reported a 129% increase in child self-generated sexual material from 2021-2022. Self-generated imagery are child sexual abuse images and videos created using smartphones or webcams that are shared online. In some cases, children are groomed, deceived, or extorted into producing and sharing a sexual image or video of themselves by someone who is not physically present in the room with the child. These images are most often taken in a home setting – a child's bedroom, or a bathroom. Source: Internet Watch Foundation, 2022, IWF Annual Report.

[23] Source: Freedom of Information data requested by NSPCC.

messages received from an adult, or someone perceived to be an adult, online. More specifically, the research aimed to:

- Gain an understanding of the pathways of how children are exposed to these messages.
- Explore factors that may influence children's decision making.
- Gather information on children's responses to receiving sexualised messages on an online service e.g. they may decide to block or report the user.

1.2   Sample and methodology

In order to achieve these aims, a qualitative methodology, consisting of in-depth interviews with children and young adults who had experienced receiving sexualised messages (from adults or perceived adults) online, was adopted. An initial sample framework was developed to try and capture a range of experiences among children aged 14-17.

Factors in this framework included: type of interaction (e.g. received a sexualised message with no previous conversation, no response; received a sexualised message following prior conversation, no response; and received a sexualised message and responded), follow up action taken to any messages received, profile of user sending messages, profile of the child, and type of online service where messages were sent.

Children and young adults were provided with a £20 thank-you voucher for their time.

1.2.1 Final sample details

Due to challenges in recruiting children within the sampling framework to take part in interviews, it was necessary during the study to expand the scope of the research to conduct interviews with young adults up to the age of 24 who had experienced sexualised messages online when they were a child.[24] The research was also expanded to include interviews with professionals working with children who had experienced receiving sexualised messages online. Fieldwork was conducted between 7th June 2023 and 20th March 2024, and consisted of two strands:

- **In-depth interviews with 11 children and young adults** (aged 14 to 24) with experience of receiving sexualised messages (from adults or perceived adults) online. **During interviews, those over 18 reflected on their experiences from when they were a child**. As such, all findings reflected in this report relate to the experiences of children. One **interview was held with the parents of a child** who had experienced online grooming.[25] Experiences varied across the sample with participants receiving a range of messages, including immediately explicit messages, messages requesting images, explicit images, and explicit messages following previous non-sexualised messages. It should also be noted that many young people included in this research had multiple experiences of receiving different types of messages (further detail in Appendix 1). For brevity, where relevant, we refer to children and young adults throughout this report as 'young people'.

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[24] Please note: Both children and young adults reflected on experiences when they were aged 16 and younger.

[25] In this case, a face-to-face interview had been arranged with the child. However, on the day, the child felt unable to take part, so the interviewer spoke with the parents at the pre-determined time and venue.

- ▪ **In-depth interviews with 9 professionals** working with children that have experienced receiving these messages online. These included staff from specialist charities working with young people, and designated safeguarding officers from schools.

A detailed breakdown of the sample is included in Appendix 1 of this report.

1.2.2 Recruitment pathways

Given the anticipated challenges in recruiting children to take part in the research, a number of recruitment pathways were identified and utilised:

Recruitment via gatekeepers – appropriate contacts from the Marie Collins Foundation helped to identify both young people that they worked with and members of their lived experience panel[26] who could take part in interviews, and further professionals through which young people could be identified. For example, a number of school stakeholders (such as safeguarding leads) were identified and contacted, providing access to young people who decided to participate in this research. These professionals were also able to take part in interviews themselves following the agreed expansion of the scope of the research.

Online recruitment questionnaire – a short 5-minute survey was conducted through Ipsos' online panel, identifying young people either directly (in the case of older age groups) or via their parents (for those under 16) to be recontacted to take part in qualitative interviews.

Use of existing quantitative sample – Ipsos worked with Ofcom to gain access to a sample of individuals who had responded to a quantitative survey undertaken on a similar topic for Ofcom[27] and had consented to being recontacted for qualitative follow-up research.

1.3 Ethics and safeguarding

Given the particularly sensitive topic area and engagement of potentially vulnerable individuals in this research, stringent safeguarding processes were put in place to minimise any risk of harm to participants and researchers. These involved:

Safeguarding and disclosure processes

Ipsos and Ofcom worked collaboratively, with the advice of Professor Julia Davidson and Dr Anna Gekoski as well as input from experts at Marie Collins Foundation, to put together a detailed bespoke safeguarding and disclosure policy for this research. This served to guide researchers on how to recognise a safeguarding or disclosure issue during the research and to understand how to respond appropriately.

Trauma-informed research training

At the start of the project, all Ipsos UK researchers involved in this project, alongside colleagues from Ofcom, took part in a half-day in-person trauma-informed research training session led by AVA (Against

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[26] A small network of adult victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Members of the group have a wide range of different experiences including familial abuse, trafficking, image-based abuse, child sexual exploitation and technology-assisted abuse.
[27] Ofcom, 2023, Understanding online communications among children.

Violence & Abuse). This training informed the development of all materials and fieldwork practices used during this research.

Enabling participation

It was important to take a flexible approach to recruitment and fieldwork given the challenging and specific focus of the research. Participants were offered the choice of conducting interviews in a format they were most comfortable with, whether it was in person, virtually or over the phone. They were also invited to bring a trusted adult with them for support. No participant in this research took up this opportunity.

Informed consent

Given the subject matter of this research, and the target group of respondents, ensuring continuous informed consent was essential. This included gaining parental consent for those aged 14-17 years old. Information sheets were developed both for parents and for young people themselves. Consent was collected in writing prior to interviews, and participants were asked to reiterate consent verbally before taking part. All participants were given opportunities to ask questions both prior to, and during interviews, and the voluntary nature of interviews was communicated to them. They were also informed that they could stop or pause the interview at any time.

Support provided to participants

We recruited young people who had direct experience of receiving sexualised messages online, including online grooming. It was with utmost importance to ensure that the necessary steps were taken to mitigate any risk that participants are retraumatised or experience harm due to this research. We worked with gatekeepers to identify potential participants who were 'ready' to take part in research, which was considered on a case-by-case basis. Considerations made included the time that had passed since the incident, whether they were receiving any help or had done in the past, or any mental health conditions or recent episodes. This list was not exhaustive and was dependent on the emotional wellbeing of an individual and any other factors in their lives.

The interviews were flexible and participant-led and included sufficient time to build rapport with young people and a significant wind down section to ensure the research ended on a positive note. Participants were also provided with a leaflet which included information on support they could access if they wanted to talk to somebody.

Direct quotations

We have included direct quotations from the young people and professionals who took part in interviews as a part of this research. Participants were informed, when deciding whether or not to take part in the research, that quotations could be used. We have also used pen portraits throughout to illustrate the experiences of young people. These have been pseudonymised to ensure no participants are identifiable.

1.4   Limitations

Despite using multiple avenues to recruit young people, there were many challenges in achieving the sample as originally planned. Given the nature and sensitivity of the topic, many young people were not ready to discuss their experiences. Similarly, organisations working with individuals with lived

experiences were cognisant of any potential wellbeing or safeguarding concerns that might arise during an interview. Another challenge faced were delays to obtaining consent through the multiple recruitment avenues. It was often a longer process when contacting parents who had taken part in the online survey, or when safeguarding leads had reached out to parents, to see whether their child would like to take part in the research.

Throughout the recruitment process, Ipsos worked closely with the gatekeepers to ensure that participants were aware of the interview procedures and comfortable to take part. This was essential to conducting ethical research, yet it was a challenge to ensure that participants were both 'research ready' and that experiences, particularly of online service functionalities, were still relevant in the context of a rapidly changing online environment. Therefore, this report does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all children that receive sexual messages online. Instead, it seeks to explore factors that influence pathways, decision-making, and experiences of using online services.

2 Children's online communications

To understand the context in which sexualised messages occur, young people were first asked about their general use of the internet. The interviews with young people provided helpful context with regards to the time they spent online, who they interacted with and their knowledge of the risks and dangers as well as the benefits of being online.

Being online was seen as an integral part of young people's lives. They noted using the internet for education, including to find information and complete schoolwork, and leisure. This included communicating with their friends and family, playing games, and consuming online content. They said they mainly used phones to access the internet, but they also had access to the online world via laptops and tablets.

"I'd say I use the internet for basically almost everything nowadays." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Many young people noted they had restrictions on the time they could spend on the internet and for those reflecting on when they were under 18, similar restrictions were in place then. However, they also said they were often unsupervised when online. Rules were put in place either by their parents or by schools to limit internet access. However, young people noted that they could get around these rules, or that during times they were allowed access to the internet, this was often not supervised. They discussed how it was easy for them to set up social media accounts that their parents or guardians did not know about, using new email addresses. This was also enabled by simple self-verification age checks that were in place on many online services but were seen as easy to bypass by inputting a false date of birth.

Using social media was commonly cited as a main activity. Specific online services most often highlighted by young people in the research included Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok. Others such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were also mentioned albeit less frequently alongside smaller online services. They used these online services both to consume and post content, and to connect with others. Participants noted posting content, such as images, comments, and videos, both on private stories and on public social media profiles. They noted that viewing and reacting to content posted by friends was an easy way to stay in contact with others and maintain friendships.

"I go online quite a bit. I'd say I probably average about 3 or 5 hours-ish a day on my phone and quite a big portion of that is probably on social media sites." **Child, aged 14-17**

Many young people felt interactions with strangers, including adults, was an inevitable aspect of the internet. While young people often used social media to communicate with friends, they also had contact with people they had not met in person. The level of interaction with strangers online varied across the young people who took part in the research and ranged from connecting with another user on an online service through to having private conversations or interactions, such as direct messaging. One participant, now aged over 18, noted feeling 'disgusted' by the content and number of messages she had received when she was younger from adult/perceived adult strangers online but reported that, at the time, it felt quite normal and an expected side effect of being on social media services.

"I thought at the time that it was just something that you had to deal with." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Although young people were more likely to accept connections on social media from people they knew, they did report instances of accepting people they did not know. It was apparent that the young people we spoke to had their own conceptualisation of what defined a 'stranger' online. This definition appeared different to the more general definition of someone they did not know. For example, they did not consider a mutual friend of an online connection as a stranger, even if they had never heard of or met them before. They explained how this meant they would be more willing to accept a connection online if they saw that they had mutual connections. However, it should be noted that participants did not always seem to verify whether someone was actually a mutual friend of someone they knew, or just someone that they had mutual online connections with.

"You'd end up talking to people that were friends of friends, or they were mutual friends…all people that were my age, or appeared to be my age, and who were mutual friends of other people, I'd say that was my circle, but you wouldn't necessarily speak to someone that would just add you randomly out of nowhere, who looked like an adult, who didn't have any mutual friends…you thought you were somehow connected." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Similarly, participants noted enjoying connecting with others online, including strangers, where there were identified shared interests, such as music or while playing the same game online. This led them to feel a connection with these strangers, making them more likely to interact with them.

"I wouldn't add anyone I don't know, but I have, like, added people on Snapchat that I didn't know, but I kind of knew of them, but I never really talked to them." **Child, aged 14-17**

Young people included in the research said they were more likely to tell their friends about speaking to strangers online than their parents, although this seemed to depend on how open they were with their parents, or with an individual parent.

The extent of interactions with strangers appeared to vary between online services. For example, the young people we spoke to deemed it common to interact with strangers on Instagram, an online service they described as one with more of an embedded culture of following people you don't know. Similarly, they noted that adding strangers on Snapchat had been normalised amongst young people and this was largely due to its functionality that enables other users to be added quickly, which is explored further in Section 3 of this report. In comparison, participants generally noted that they would not accept people as friends that they did not know personally on Facebook.

Other indicators were used by young people to assess the perceived safety of interacting with strangers online. For example, one child referenced checking a person's 'snap score' on Snapchat before accepting a connection – noting that a very low score could mean an individual whose account had been recently started (perhaps due to an old account being deleted, disabled, or banned) and a very high score meaning that they frequently sent out a large number of pictures. Both scenarios were reported by the child to be off-putting and would make it less likely that they would accept a connection, and/or engage with that user.

"[If] someone has got a really low snap score then I often don't add them back purely because in the past…they've been trying to get money off of me or something like that. So, I know that if you've got a low snap score it means you're changing accounts really quickly…But also if it's wildly huge, if it's, like, a 2 million snap score, I'm like, I don't really want to be touching that because then you've been snapping so many people…you're probably a lot older because you've probably had the account for longer." **Child, aged 14-17**

In some cases, participants discussed a changing attitude as they got older, towards interacting with strangers. They felt less comfortable interacting with strangers over time and were better able to recognise the dangers based on previous negative experiences of when they were younger.

"Now that I'm older I don't really direct message people I don't know as often." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Perceptions of whether an individual was an 'adult' varied. For example, people aged 18 or 19 were not always perceived as 'adults' by young people we spoke with, whereas those in their 20s and older were. Some young people suggested that they would be more likely to accept connections and interact with those they thought were younger, including those aged around 18 and 19.

3 Pathways of sexual conversations and interactions

This section explores the interactions between the young people that were interviewed and adults or perceived adults online. It specifically looks at the different pathways of engagement, citing how interactions began and on what online services, how the young people decided who to interact with and whether they moved between online services. It covers how functionalities of online services may facilitate the sending of sexualised messages online as well as how the young people define what are sexualised messages online with adults or perceived adults.

3.1 Understanding of what constitutes sexualised messages

Young people reflected on a range of different types of messages they had received and what they considered constituted being sexualised messages. The different identifiers of such communication that they discussed included:

- Being asked to meet the adult or perceived adult, rather than engaging with them solely online. This included being asked to go to the adult's (or perceived adult's) house.

    "I think one of the messages he sent me was, like, 'You should come over to my house.' And I think he gave me his address as well. And then he was, like, 'We can, like, have fun together.' … it just made me uncomfortable." **Child, aged 14-17**

- Receiving nude images of the adult or perceived adult at any stage in the conversation. Even where a rapport had been built between the young person and the adult/perceived adult, the young person felt uncomfortable and commonly ashamed when the tone switched, and these kinds of images were sent to them.

- Receiving requests to send photos of themself. This ranged from asking to send photos of their face or of themselves without stating the type of image, through to being asked to send nude images. This often included asking for a photo of their face or commenting on their looks which was then followed up by inappropriate comments.

    "It was something along the lines of asking what I look like, and if I was attractive, the things that they'd potentially do, and it wasn't very nice. It was very sexualised." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

- Use of known slang to check whether they would send images. While the research did not intend to gather a list of known slang, young people cited they received messages on Snapchat which say: "do you send?", a commonly used phrase that infers whether that young person would send sexual images of themselves. It was not always obvious what age the person sending the messages was and it was recognised that "do you send" and other slang like "WYLL" (what you look like) are terms used by both their peers as well as people older than them (aged 18 and over).

3.2 Common pathways to sexualised messages

How children receive sexualised messages online from adults or perceived adults can be classified into two broad categories: messages from those with no mutual connections and messages from those with mutual connections.

Unsolicited messages from an individual with no mutual online connections

Young people cited that receiving messages from an individual that they had no mutual connections with was not uncommon. These messages tended to become explicit immediately (in the first message) or very quickly.

These messages were commonly received on social media services; young people in this research commonly cited Snapchat, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). They described how these online services have functionalities that allow users to easily connect with others, including users who have no mutual connections with each other.

The perception of who the sender of the message was varied among young people. They suggested that there were some spam or 'fake' accounts that would try to connect with them, who were often users with multiple numbers in the username, no profile picture, or a cartoon profile picture, or had minimal or no followers. Young people described how these accounts were often used to send explicit images, or request images, sometimes in exchange for money or job opportunities like modelling. However, others suggested that these were individual accounts belonging to adults who were specifically targeting children. They referenced that in some instances they could gauge the user's estimated age based on their profile, such as a profile picture or images on their account or based on an assessment of an image.

"It'll be accounts that are, like, random names, and it'll just be like, 'I'll give you £1,000 if you send this or send that.' And it'll be like, 'Hey, do you want to model for us?' Sometimes, they'll be like, 'Send a bikini photo.'" **Child, aged 14-17**

The communication was felt to be explicit in the first message or interaction, such as receiving nude photos of both men and women from people that they did not know. Young people spoke about how strangers would add them and proceed to send unsolicited sexual images or videos without any prior conversation. This ranged from topless images to full nudity.

Receiving these types of sexual material online from adults or perceived adults among the young people we spoke to were rarely isolated incidents. They were able to speak to multiple incidents that had happened to them. For example, one young adult spoke about how when she was aged between 10 and 13 years old, she had received messages from both "older men" as well as those that were "in their late teens or early twenties" who commented on what her body looked like and made inappropriate comments about images on the participant's profile.

"[the messages] would like, oh you have really nice lips, they would look nice on my-, insert genitalia here. Or breasts, things about my breasts." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

In some cases, young people also reported that they had received sexual material from an individual with no mutual connections after a small number of non-sexual messages. For example, a child spoke about how an adult had sent a compliment to him on Instagram via direct messages and then proceeded to send an explicit video of the adult performing a sexual act.

Children's exposure to sexual messages online via individuals with no mutual connections was viewed among young people and professionals as common. Young people reported that they were less likely to reply to a message that contained an explicit image, whereas they were more likely to engage with messages where there had been some 'normal' conversation beforehand. The risk factors of further engagement are outlined in Section 5.

Mandy – young adult, aged 18-24

Mandy received sexualised messages, including an indecent image, from an older man that was unknown to her when she was 16 years old. The man added her on Snapchat and sent messages asking her what she looked like, whether she was attractive and made sexualised remarks. While Mandy was reading the message – which she felt "*disgusted*" by – he sent through an indecent picture of himself, including his face. She judged him to be in his twenties or thirties. She described feeling shocked that a person she did not know would send such explicit images to her. The man also asked Mandy to send pictures of herself, which she did not do. Mandy did not reply to any of the messages and blocked the user.

Uncomfortable sexualised messages from an individual with mutual online connections

Young people said they also received sexualised messages from individuals that they had one or more mutual online connections with. As outlined in Section 2, they did not always consider those who they had mutual online connections with as a stranger, even if they did not know who they were. We heard examples where they would accept connection or message requests from these individuals without verifying any mutual connections.

These sexualised messages were received across multiple social media services, with participants commonly mentioning Snapchat and Instagram. Because many of the senders had mutual connections, young people said they initially assumed the sender to be another young person or a younger adult (late teenage or early twenties). Receiving messages from a younger adult was seen as a compliment as they thought that someone who they may have a mutual online connection with wanted to interact with them. However, in some cases, young people told us that these individuals turned out to be an adult or much older adult than initially thought, which they were often able to work out based on images received.

Young people referred to the initial content of conversations as "normal" and "non-sexual". The user would initially send age-appropriate messages to begin with and mirror the language the young person would use themselves. For example, one young adult felt that the initial conversations were not overtly sexual and would not be obvious that the user was older.

"If it was someone that looked about my age, and they came up with more, maybe an age-appropriate message ... and I don't think it would ever start off overtly sexual, it would just be like, 'Hey,' winky face, kiss. So, they're kind of, like, flirtatious, but is not, 'Woah, I don't know you, what the hell is this?' And then it could quite often progress very quickly." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

This type of conversation varied, either from a few message exchanges to longer conversations. The conversation was normally trying to get to know them, friendly and often involved complimenting them. In instances where the conversation was shorter, young people reflected how the other person would also ask about what they looked like or what their age was. Following this conversation, young people were then exposed to sexual content including sexualised messages and images or videos.

[after receiving a sexually explicit message] "I was like, 'Oh my God, what is this?' Being really taken aback by it, and then I obviously didn't know what to say, and I think he double texted me and was like, 'What do you think?'… And I was like, 'Yes, that's nice.' …I didn't encourage it but I didn't discourage it

either, so I think he did it again after that and I was like, 'Oh okay.' I never really responded in the way that he needed to respond but I couldn't shut it down either." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Polly – child, aged 14-17

Polly spoke of an incident that occurred where she received sexualised messages from an 18-year-old male. He initially added her on Snapchat, where she added him back as they had mutual friends, before following her on Instagram. She described their conversation as chatting "generally" on Snapchat. Following this, he messaged on Instagram asking if she wanted to "see something" and he sent her a photo of himself without a t-shirt on. At this point, Polly described how she felt uncomfortable and told the male to stop contacting her. However, the male was persistent and continued to message her, including giving her his address and asking her to go round so they could "*have fun together"*, and to send photos of herself. She blocked him on Instagram, but he contacted her again via Snapchat to ask why he had been blocked and that he wanted to continue getting to know her. Polly blocked him on Snapchat, too.

3.3 Pathways to extended engagement with adults (or perceived adults)

The research identified some key pathways that can lead to extended engagement with adults or perceived adults. The participants in the research had a range of experiences, such as receiving sexualised messages and not responding, through to experiencing online grooming. It's important to note that experiences of online grooming were from a small sample size, as well as some insights from professionals, and therefore while they illustrate the experiences of those we spoke to, they are only indicative of potential broader trends.

There was a **difference in decision-making among girls with 'younger' men compared to 'older' men**. Girls and young women who had received messages from both men perceived to be older and men perceived to be younger, felt that it was harder to ignore messages from younger men, such as those aged 18 or 19 years old. They described how they valued their opinions more, wanted to be liked by them or wanted to be viewed as 'cool'. These individuals felt it was easier to ignore messages from older men because it was perceived to be more uncomfortable, and they did not want to be liked by them.

"I would say it [receiving messages from younger men] was a bit more conflicting because obviously with the people that you don't know that are just strangers and they're just old people, you could just ignore them, but then it's like, 'Oh I actually want these people [younger men] to like me and be fond of me.' So it was trying to engage without not engaging, so if they say something sexual, you'd be like, 'That's a nice compliment, thank you.' … I had every right to be antagonistic but at the time I was like, 'I still want these people to like me and think I'm cool. I didn't want to be like a little girl that was kicking up a fuss about this little thing." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Another pathway that led to extended engagement was **moving from one online service to another**. There were some instances where young people described how the communications started on one social media service before moving to another, often (among the young people we spoke to) between Snapchat and Instagram. In these cases, young people explained how they thought they knew the other person through mutual friends or had assumed the person was of a similar age. Conversations were

often described as "normal", before moving to another online service and turning sexual. However, there was no pattern identified in which online service was more commonly used first than another.

In some cases, young people said they initially engaged with a user because the individual had **posed as someone they knew offline, or as someone who was a similar age**. This communication often started as "normal" and messages were flattering, before moving towards being coercive or pressuring young people to send images of themselves. In one instance, a child who was groomed received threats of suicide – often used as a coercion method – which made it challenging for the child to stop responding to the messages. Professionals who worked with children and young adults echoed how the communication changes from being nice into blackmail.

"…the grooming changes from being very nice to children, to then being blackmail and horrible, and it's not only that but people threaten to kill themselves as well if they don't send-, we get a lot of groomers and paedophiles online who then threaten to kill themselves if they don't send more pictures"
Professional

> **Marie – child, aged 14-17**
>
> Marie was a victim of online grooming by a user who posed as a boy her own age. The interaction started on a gaming platform before moving to Snapchat. The interactions began with flattery, before pressuring her to send a sexual image of herself. She was then coerced into sending more images alongside receiving threats that the groomer would commit suicide if she did not send more images.

While the focus of this research was on children receiving sexualised messages from an adult aged 18 and over, the research also found evidence of peer-to-peer harmful sexual behaviour and the subsequent impact of those experiences. For example, in one case, CSAM relating to a young person we spoke to was distributed among peers, without their consent, and posted on social media and messaging services. Following this, an adult contacted the young person, who was under 18 years old at the time, on Facebook to disclose they had seen the images and provided them with compliments. While the young person reflected that at the time they had recognised that the conversations prompted thoughts on 'stranger danger', they described how they knew the interactions were not appropriate but made them feel good in comparison to negative comments made by their peers.

Professionals described an alternative method of coercion. They explained **the rise of sextortion and noted a pattern of targeting teenage boys**. This involved coercing young boys into sending pictures of themselves through initial flattery or sending them an image of a girl, which can be inferred as 'catfishing',[28] to encourage the boys to reciprocate. Professionals mentioned the images were assumed to be fake as once these users had received images of young boys, they then blackmailed the victims. These users demanded money or additional images, with the threat of posting images online or sending to contacts if they did not comply.

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[28] Catfishing can be defined as the act of deceiving somebody else online by using a fake identity (Catfishing (cybersmile.org)).

3.4 Functions of online services that facilitate the sending of sexualised messages

This subsection will explore key functions of online services that are more conducive to, or have been identified as, potential facilitators to sexualised communications with children.

Direct messaging

Young people commonly described their experiences of receiving sexualised messages online as being through direct messaging on social media services. However, there were scenarios where individuals had received sexualised messages within a group-chat, or sexualised remarks made in comment sections underneath posts.

'Quick add' function

'Quick add' is a function on Snapchat that suggests potential friends for users to add based on their phone contacts, mutual friends, and other factors. Young people reflected how they used this function, as well as received requests from other users they assumed to be using this function. Participants felt this function enables adults (or perceived adults) to quickly add many users including children, widening the base of who they are engaging with.

Young people who used online services with this function, such as Snapchat, highlighted that they did receive multiple requests from individuals that they did not know, including those that they did and did not have mutual friends with. In some cases, they did not have to accept the request before the individual making the connection request could contact them directly, although it was not known whether this was based on the online service's settings or the user's settings. While young people said that they would not accept a request if they had no mutual connections, they were more likely to accept these requests if there were mutual connections. They often would not check these profiles in detail when accepting a request, for example they did not need to have a high number of mutual connections, nor did the connections need to be their closest friends in order for them to accept requests (for more information on what children do take into consideration and when, please see Section 3). Participants thought that the individual connecting with them must be local if they had mutual friends, but in the examples in this research, this frequently turned out not to be the case.

Features allowing anonymity

Young people thought online services offered varying levels of anonymity. For example, some services, such as Instagram and X, are typically based on showing your identity through profile pictures and/or posts to your community about your life. They felt that it was easier to get a sense of who a user was and what they were like on these types of services.

Young people described how some online services, such as Snapchat, offered greater levels of anonymity as you could have nicknames as usernames rather than full names and did not have to have a real image as a profile picture and could use a 'bitmoji', a cartoon-like image. This made it more difficult to verify the person they had connected with, or who added them. Young people believed online services that offered greater anonymity allowed adults (or perceived adults) to hide behind a fake identity or could re-invent themselves as a younger user that 'fits in' with those they are aiming to befriend. They felt this meant those individuals were less afraid to send sexualised messages as there were fewer perceived repercussions due to the lack of verification.

"I think it's that it really feels anonymous. Like, when you're just name and then a little Bitmoji, you're not a person and you type and then you see the pictures, but you're not real on Snapchat, almost. Whereas, with Instagram and things like that, you've got a profile picture, you've got a phone, your life is documented. …it's all surface level on Snapchat, whereas with Instagram and things like that it's a bit deeper… Even if you're not completely anonymous, you still will feel it, because you can put any name and you can put any age in, … and it's not verified" **Child, aged 14-17**

Time-limited messages and disclosive screenshotting

Some social media services, such as Snapchat, have temporary messaging and imaging functions. This means that a message or image that is sent disappears after it has been viewed, or a short period of time has passed, and cannot be viewed again.

Young people thought that online services with this function were more conducive to users receiving sexualised messages. The images could be sent but not easily saved, and private messages were often deleted after 24 hours. They explained how this made it more difficult to show someone else (another adult for example) the content sent to them.

Participants described that Snapchat would generally notify an individual if a screenshot was taken of a message or image. Young people said they were dissuaded from taking a screenshot to show an adult as they felt uncomfortable knowing that the person would have been notified if they had taken a screenshot.

"One of the things that, like, if you screenshot it, they know, and they can just, as soon as you've done that, they can block you or whatever, and Instagram, you can't, you won't know, and things like that, and Snapchat, I feel like, it's almost become more normalised to ask those questions" **Child, aged 14-17**

Professionals also noted the false sense of security that time-limited messages or disclosive screenshotting can have for groomers sending the messages, which has facilitated the environment for sexualised messages to be shared on online services like Snapchat.

"So I think there's this idea that it's-, there's a false sense of security around the fact that the message can't easily be spread on or passed on."– **Professional**

4 Risk factors and impacts

Ofcom research has shown three in five (60%) 11-18 year olds have experienced some form of potentially uncomfortable interactions or conversations when communicating online at some point in the past.[29] This section explores the risk factors that may increase the risk of replying to sexualised messages from adults online, drawing largely from trends identified by professionals working in the sector, and clear themes evident from the interviews with young people.

This section also outlines the impact that receiving these messages had on the young people interviewed or the children professionals had worked with, focusing both on initial messages received and further engagement.

4.1   Risk factors in responding to sexualised messaging

It was consistently agreed by participants that receiving sexualised messages from adults was a regular occurrence. Professionals were hesitant to identify specific characteristics of children that made them more 'at risk', as these types of messages were perceived to be commonly received by children with access to social media. Aligning with this, the young people that were interviewed in this study did not consider receiving sexualised messages to be unusual and cited them as a common occurrence among their friends as well as from their personal experience.

"[I] didn't think much of it when I received the message. I just thought, oh, they just added me." **Child, aged 14-17**

There were, however, some characteristics and circumstances that professionals identified as shaping who may be more at risk of replying to sexualised messages.

Professionals identified children who were more likely to struggle with social isolation as being among those more at risk of engaging with messages online. They spoke about children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as potentially being at a higher risk of engaging with messages sent to them. The potential for greater levels of social isolation among some of these children was linked to a desire for connection, which makes them vulnerable to responding to unsolicited messages online. Additionally, in some cases, they felt young children in this group may be less likely to recognise the messages received from the adult and the subsequent requests as being inappropriate. Looked After Children (LAC) were also identified by professionals as being at a higher risk of engaging with messages sent to them, as this group were also perceived to be at higher risk of social isolation.

Income was also regarded as a contributing factor, with children from both higher and lower income households perceived to be at greater risk for different reasons. Children from lower income households, including aforementioned LAC, were perceived by professionals to be at risk as, in some cases, groomers would offer money for CSAM, making them more likely to respond. Professionals spoken to as part of this research suggested that, in some cases, children from independent schools that they had supported may have been sought out and targeted by online groomers because of the perceived wealth of the child. As described earlier in this report, professionals cited multiple cases where children had

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[29] Ofcom, 2023, Understanding online communications among children.

been targeted for sextortion, being groomed into sharing pictures or having pictures doctored and then extorting the child for money to prevent them being posted online.

Beyond this, professionals reported that demographic factors, including age and gender, were not perceived to play a substantial role in determining the risk of replying to sexualised messages. While research shows that girls aged 16-18 were significantly more likely to have experienced receiving sexualised messages,[30] this research did not find sufficient evidence to draw any conclusions on gender differences.

"There is no specific sort of group of young people that are targeted. It could be boys, girls, special educational needs, there is no pattern to it at all." **Professional**

Circumstantial factors were considered to be more important in terms of whether the child engaged with sexualised messages that they received from adults. Professionals within charities tended to refer to the mood the child was in or the type of day they'd had as factors that shaped whether and how they responded. For example, drivers to responding included having a bad day or week or feeling lonely. These professionals also hypothesised that children may be more likely to reply when they were alone. Another circumstantial factor highlighted by professionals was lower levels of self-esteem or insecurity. Reasons cited were how children often want self-validation, and they noted how compliments or forms of flattery would boost children's self-esteem or confidence and thus increased the likelihood of the child responding. This aligned with the reflections of young people about their own personal experiences. This suggests that children who are seeking or want validation may be more vulnerable/likely to respond.

"You're so insecure, and the whole thing with online is, there's this thing around the euphoria when you get 'likes', when you get comments, when you share something and people think it's really cool ... it's the same with body image, when you're bombarded with all of these other girls at school that look one way, all of these influencers that look another way, and nobody's telling you, you look like that, when someone comes in and says those things, it's nice to hear, and you seek that out again and again, and that's the toxic pattern that I'm talking about, seeking out more and more abusive relationships." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Professionals reflected more broadly about their concerns with how much time children spend online. While they were speaking about children in general rather than children they had supported, they felt that the sheer volume of time spent online made it more likely that children would be exposed to sexualised messages.

Because of these very broad risk factors, professionals emphasised that it was often impossible to predict a 'type' of child that would engage with sexualised messages, making it more difficult to predict and prevent children receiving them.

4.2 Impacts on children

While the impact varied substantially by individual case, there were some patterns identified. We will begin by exploring the impacts of receiving initial messages from adults where contact was stopped

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[30] Ofcom, 2023, Understanding online communications among children.

immediately or soon after. We then explore the impacts of more prolonged engagement between the adult and the young person.

Impacts of receiving initial messages

There were two overarching determinations of the impact that the messages had on the young people we spoke to: the type of message received (a personalised message targeted at an individual versus a generic message that often immediately contained an explicit image); and who the young person perceived the sender of the message to be (a younger adult versus an older adult).

The table below outlines the general patterns identified in how the type of message determined the impact of the initial messages on the young person.

Type of message	Impact on children
Personalised message targeted at the individual child	Professionals cited that groomers used this method as a tool to engage a child under false pretences. A common pattern was sending messages to build a friendship or using flattery as a way to connect to the child, such as a groomer complimenting images of the child that they are 'pretty'. Initially, young people discussed how these types of messages (when received as a child) had made them feel validated to a certain extent. They described how compliments were often included in these messages that made them feel good about themselves. When the content turned explicit and/or led to threats, young people described feeling violated and betrayed, at the time, by someone they had trusted. This was cited by professionals as having long lasting impacts on children's mental health, confidence, trust, and self-worth.
Generic message	Generic messages were often sent immediately with explicit images. They did not tend to include compliments and young people said they immediately provoked feelings of disgust and did not make them feel good about themselves. While they said they would laugh about these messages with friends, they also said that privately they did not find these messages amusing. The young people we spoke to tended to be less interested in who these messages were from. However, in some circumstances, some felt obliged to show they were not antagonistic, particularly if it was a friend of a friend, or if they were perceived to be younger adults. They explained how they may send a short reply but not feel positive about it. Both young people and professionals also suggested that children were becoming desensitised to this type of message.

Further, the perceived age of the user sending the message also had an impact. When messages were perceived to be from a younger adult, young people described how they found their opinions more validating than older adults. Young people framed this group as one that they would like to impress (as a child). It is important to note that 18 and 19-year-olds were discussed by multiple participants as being older children rather than young adults. When the content of the messages turned explicit and/or led to threats, young people faced similar impacts to personal, targeted messages.

"There was [sic] still older boys that would message me, so not adults, so I was 12, 13 and there would be some [boys] who were like 18, 19, 17, so if I was in Year 7 and they were in Year 11 or in college or something. So obviously when they would message me, like that to me was-, it was more satisfying than an old man messaging me because those are the people whose attention or opinions I actually valued." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Young people did not feel obliged to build a rapport with older adults in the way that some did with younger adults. They described receiving the images and messages as 'disgusting' and 'shaming'.

Impacts of prolonged engagement

The level of engagement that young people said they had with adults or perceived adults online varied from receiving messages and blocking users straight away, through to replying to messages and having conversations. Prolonged engagement can be defined as engaging with an adult, or perceived adult, with at least a few message exchanges between them.

When the communication turned sexualised, or where the contact was personalised and prolonged, the impacts became more significant. The key impacts identified through this research are outlined below.

One impact was the **feeling of shame** that came with receiving and engaging with these messages, and also a sense of **self-blame**. Young people described how they had felt that they must have done something to provoke the user into talking to them in that way or sending them images. Because of this they felt less able to speak to a responsible adult about it.

In some cases, feelings of shame were **coupled with isolation**. Isolation (as an impact as opposed to a driver of harm) manifested itself in multiple different ways. These young people described how they were less likely to disclose the incident to friends or family, distancing themselves from friends because of these feelings of shame. Professionals within specialist charities explained how young victims they had worked with were often bullied or isolated by peers in cases where images or messages had been released or sent to people they knew. They also noted that the victims' friends were known to distance themselves from the child, to avoid getting bullied for associating with the child that had had images leaked, which in turn reinforced the feelings of shame and isolation.

"It makes you feel really isolated, I think, and ashamed. I would say those are probably the two biggest feelings, because you feel like you did something to invite that, like there was something in the way that you were speaking to make him feel like it was okay to send you that." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Shame and isolation were perceived to impact the **way in which children behaved more broadly**. Professionals within charities described how children they had worked with could become reactive to situations and often act out of character in a way that might get them in trouble with teachers or parents, for example exhibiting disruptive behaviour at school due to being unable to control their emotions. These professionals outlined how this was a result of their feelings of isolation and shame. They also

explained how the children they had worked with reported that responsible adults reacting in an angry or disciplinary way was perceived as inappropriate, particularly when the child had been a victim.

Where CSAM had been shared among peers, **young people said they had missed education** (as a child). For example, they were anxious and scared about going into school knowing that others had seen the images and were worried about how they would be treated at school. In some cases, the young people received nasty messages and were bullied.

More broadly, **the mental health of children was perceived to suffer** as a result of online grooming. Professionals mentioned how anxiety and depression, as well as disordered eating, were considered to be common impacts on children. The professionals we spoke with from charities thought, based on the experiences of the children they worked with, the responses of relevant authorities to mental health concerns were often not adequate. For example, professionals from charities explained how children they supported were not commonly referred for support and, where they were, minimal support was made available to them.

5 Interactions with others and reporting or blocking sexualised messages

This section explores the interactions that the young people interviewed had with others about sexualised messages, including with friends, family and trusted professionals or adults. It also explores how they decided whether or not to take any action, such as by blocking or deleting a user, through to reporting to an online service or to law enforcement. The section also contains detail about perceptions and use of online service safety features.

5.1 Interactions with others about sexualised messages

This subsection will explore whether and how the young people interviewed interacted with friends, family, and professionals about receiving sexualised messages and how these interactions influenced their decision-making.

The decision-making behind whether participants decided to tell somebody else about receiving sexualised messages was nuanced, and they reported multiple factors as influencing whether they would talk to either friends, family, or other trusted adults such as teachers. It was common for them to tell their friends about an incident if they perceived the incident to be less serious, but young people were more likely to say they would tell parents if they perceived the consequences of the interaction(s) to be more serious.

Interacting with friends about sexualised messages

Whether participants chose to tell their friends differed by the type of experience. Those who had received random messages from individuals they did not know, that immediately included sexualised language or images, were more likely to tell their friends about the message than tell an adult. This was even more likely if they were with their friend at the time of receiving the message.

Those who told friends about this type of message were often told by peers that they had received similar types of messages. They referenced how the most common reaction was that they would 'laugh' and 'joke' about the messages. While it was seen to be a common occurrence, it was still viewed as inappropriate.

"A few of them were, like, 'Yes, that's happened to me before,' a few were, like, 'That's disgusting.'" **Young adult, aged 18-24**

"[Some messages online are less personal] *then you just block, delete, done, and so it doesn't really mean much, and you might have a bit of a joke with your friends about like, 'Oh, yes, I got sent something last night but blocked, deleted, whatever.'"* **Child, aged 14-17**

Despite laughing and joking about the messages with their friends, young people reported feeling down or concerned about the messages. They noted that they felt pressure to feel 'okay' about the messages and to find them funny when often they were distressing. They also expressed concern that they might not have been taken seriously by their friends when they had told them about messages they had

received. They felt that their friends may not have understood the gravity of the situation(s) that they had told them about and discussed with them.

"I felt a bit bad, because I felt like they didn't know how serious it could have been. If photos were sent back and forth" **Child, aged 14-17**

Young people and professionals, particularly those who worked within charities, reported that it would be less common for children to talk to friends where communication with an adult or perceived adult was personalised and ongoing. Young people said they often felt that their friends may disapprove, or they felt personally ashamed of what they were doing. While some felt able to tell their friends after contact had stopped, this was not the case for all the young people we spoke to.

"I don't think I spoke to anyone about that, I just kind of brushed it off, because I was ashamed of the fact that I couldn't shut it down either, because me and my friend, we only really talked about it when we had shut it down, like made it bait...but if we even remotely entertained it or anything like that, we would just not talk about it at all." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Interacting with parents about sexualised messages

There was a mixed view among participants as to whether and when they felt they should tell their parents about receiving sexualised messages online.

Young people described that they did not want to talk to their parents about their experiences because it felt uncomfortable and awkward. They recognised it was a sensitive subject and did not feel equipped or prepared to have those conversations without feelings of embarrassment.

"I thought about it but then I thought it would just be a bit of an awkward and uncomfortable conversation to have." **Child, aged 14-17**

For those that did tell their parents, this was often the next step after telling friends but was not usually straight afterwards. The time lag between the incident and telling parents varied from a couple of weeks to a couple of years. Reasons why they felt they should tell their parents were either because they wanted to be open and honest with them, or they felt worried that the situation was escalating, such as receiving threats to share images more widely or being asked to send money. Professionals also reported incidents where parents had been alerted about situations when the consequences were perceived to be more serious. For example, one professional spoke about a case where the child was being blackmailed to send money after sending an image of themselves.

The young people we spoke to who told their parents reported having a positive experience, reflecting that they felt supported by their parents.

"I felt like I wasn't alone, and she would be there to support me [...] She didn't tell me off or anything. She was, like, 'I'm sorry that happened to you.'" **Child, aged 14-17**

Interacting with teachers or other professionals about sexualised messages

Reporting incidents to teachers was not common. Young people said they felt that a teacher or trusted adult would have told them to block accounts sending sexualised messages, but that this overlooks the potential nuances and emotions that they may feel – particularly if the child felt that the adult or perceived adult was not much older, and they wanted the social affirmation from the person. In one case,

while speaking hypothetically, the young person felt that they would have wanted a teacher or trusted adult to ask how it made her feel rather than be met with the direction to block the person.

"If I told a teacher and it was a nice teacher, I feel like they would have just told me to block them and stop talking to them... Any adult I think would have had that same response, because they didn't have an understanding of the nuances of those type of things, I think the response would have generally been, 'Just block them.' Or 'Stop talking to them.' ... And for me, because I had that whole social whatever in my mind like, 'I need to be liked so badly.' I don't think that would have been as helpful to me, I think they just made me feel worse for not doing it." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Professionals who worked in schools said there were strong policies within schools to ensure that children had the necessary support to deal with incidents, such as anti-bullying and online safety policies. However, despite this, young people who reflected on why they would not tell teachers or trusted adults described barriers to speaking out such as fear, shame or worry about being blamed for the situation.

In cases where CSAM had been shared among peers within schools, professionals who worked with children highlighted how they thought, in some cases, school staff needed upskilling on how to handle these scenarios. In these cases, while the school were informed, professionals from charities reflected how in their experience the response from schools had often victim-blamed the child, rather than recognising or understanding that they had been a victim.

5.2 Reporting and blocking sexualised communication to online services

Reporting

Reporting an incident (as a child) was inconsistent across the young people we spoke to. They were less likely to report messages that were immediately sexual, such as receiving an image from an unknown account. They explained that this was because receiving sexualised messages online was so common that they did not consider reporting each incident or see it as a worthwhile action. Young people also lacked motivation to report as they felt the online service would not take action, and there would be no repercussions for those users.

"There's no real point in reporting if it's just going to- because they didn't even do anything in the end. The guy was still active, and it was like, 'God.' So, it was like, 'Why even take all that time to do something that's not even going to have any implications for anyone.'" **Child, aged 14-17**

"I didn't think in that way that I can just go and report and that guy can be gone, like, he can be captured or something. I didn't think in that way. I really didn't think in that way, so I didn't really care about it. I was sad the first few days, but as every young boy-, I just forget about it." **Child, aged 14-17**

Some young people explained how they were also less comfortable reporting sexualised messages online if they felt they knew the person. This was relevant for both those that they knew offline, and those with whom they had mutual online connections. This resulted from social pressures among peers to appear relaxed about communications from others and to appear 'mature' for their age. This was particularly prevalent where the adult or perceived adult was thought to be a younger adult.

In some cases, the use of time-limited messages and disclosive screenshotting created a barrier for young people to then report the messages beyond the online service. There was a perception they needed evidence, and they were uncomfortable with taking screenshots of messages from individuals on

online services with disclosive screenshots. There was also a perception among participants that it would not be possible to identify the individuals sending these messages if they were to report it, and that they would face no repercussions. Feeling fearful of taking a screenshot may exacerbate any threats of exposure to a wider audience.

"The Snapchat one is quite a common one we hear because they know that whatever they say is going to be deleted. Any pictures I think get deleted. Any conversations. Unless you screenshot it, it's not saved." **Professional**

Where young people did talk about reporting an incident(s), it was often described as a necessary way to stop the engagement, particularly where they felt that it was too much for them to deal with on their own. They often described how they had reported incidents if they had either received multiple messages and wanted the communication to stop, felt pressure to send photos or to engage with the individual offline, or there were concerns from parents or guardians and were advised to report on the service.

"I knew that, if I'd continued to engage with him, or if I engaged with him at all, he would just get worse and worse, and I didn't want that." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Young people described how the reporting process was inconsistent across online services. There were specific services, such as Instagram, that were highlighted as having more a straightforward and visible process to report. These online services had clear functionality to aid young people to report users who had sent them sexualised messages, including:

- The option to report an account via a clear and visible icon.

- Accessible reporting functions, allowing young people to report an account both via the adult or perceived adult's profile or directly within the chat.

- Not having set criteria or reasons to report against.

"…it was pretty simple, but it was pretty general. Because it just said, 'Are you sure you want to report?' And then you just click, 'Yes.' There weren't any specific criteria on what you could block them for." **Child, aged 14-17**

Where this functionality was not in place or as visible/accessible, young people were less likely to report instances where they received sexualised messages. For example, some described that it was not clear on Snapchat how to report these individuals. Instead, those who had received sexualised messages on Snapchat, and often on multiple occasions, reflected how they either delete messages, or unfriend people. In some cases, they felt that it was not a consideration to report on Snapchat, as it was viewed as just as easy to remove/block the person.

"I feel like Instagram is pretty damn easy, if you see something that's not right, I can find the report button very easily. And Snapchat, I wouldn't have a clue. I know how to block a user, but I wouldn't know how to report, like, a story or anything like that." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Blocking

The most common type of action taken by young people we spoke with was blocking an adult or perceived adult online. This was found across different types of online services and was most notably used by the young people in our sample on Snapchat and Instagram. They generally thought it was

straightforward to find out how to do this and would feel comfortable doing so across multiple different online services.

There was a sense that blocking a user was the go-to action over reporting on an online service, citing the instant barrier between them and the user. This was particularly common on Snapchat, where those who had blocked accounts had not considered reporting them.

"It hasn't really occurred to me to, like, report a Snapchat account because I generally just get rid of it, whereas, I think, Instagram, if it's a request, it's, you can delete it or report it or open it or something like that. And I think it's more there for you just to, like, quickly do. Whereas Snapchat, it's like, it's just as quick to just unadd them." **Child, aged 14-17**

Young people who had blocked users across online services did not have strong views on how they felt after they had blocked them. For some, it was second nature to block people on online services and move on. Others blocked people more occasionally when something particularly explicit was received. Both of these groups thought this would stop the adult or perceived adult contacting them again, however they thought it was unlikely that those individuals would stop sending sexualised messages to others.

This differed for participants who knew the person offline and had blocked them online. While they felt relief, there was an overarching concern that they would interact offline as they lived in the local area.

"I felt, like, you know, quite relieved, but at the same time, I felt like he'd try to talk to me in real life, so I was quite scared of that" **Child, aged 14-17**

Carly - young adult, aged 18-24

Carly described how she had received multiple sexualised messages since she was 11 years old, often from older boys and men across different services, including Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. She spoke about one example when she was around 12 years old where she received a direct message from a man on Instagram, who she thought looked like they were in their mid-thirties, that talked about performing sexual acts. There was no previous exchange of messages between Carly and the man, and Carly described how she felt repulsed by the message she had received, which she did not respond to. She also shared how she did not feel confident enough to block the user and that it did not occur to her at the time to report him on the platform. Carly felt it came with the territory.

"I just felt like oh yes, the trick of the trade. If you post pictures and you're on Instagram and you're a pretty girl, like people are going to message you. And just get on with it really."

5.3 Reporting sexualised communications to law enforcement

Young people we spoke to said they had rarely reported incidents to law enforcement. For random messages or images from unknown senders, it was not a common action to take because of the frequency by which it happened, and the perception that action would not be taken by law enforcement.

Where law enforcement involvement had occurred, it was where a child had been groomed online. Law enforcement were then involved both in relation to the grooming offence, and impacts that resulted from the offence, for example images being shared by peers at school. Professionals explained how, in some instances, they did not think the police were effective in their response. For example, in one case, they did not believe that any action was taken against the groomer and instead the victim was blamed. Appropriate action was also not perceived to have been taken (something commonly experienced according to professionals) by the school.

Professionals also spoke about the challenges faced when dealing with the police in trying to solve online grooming cases. They often cited that they felt the police had limited resources or capacity to investigate such cases, or in some instances were told that there was limited action the police could take as the suspected groomer did not live in the UK.

5.4   Safety features on online services

Young people, as well as professionals, described how particular safety features on online services were bypassed by children so that they could access the services they wanted to use, notably social media services.

The most common safety feature mentioned by both young people and professionals was age assurance. Age assurance methods are used by social media services to determine the age of users. A common current method of age assurance is self-declaration, where individuals are asked to enter their date of birth when creating an account. Young people reported entering an age older than their own age and the minimum age restriction for the online service, to access it.[31]

Social media services generally have some forms of **parental controls** in place, but these were found to have limited success as a safety feature. Where children's accounts had been linked to a parent/guardian's email address for example, they talked about alerts being made to the linked account relating to unusual or inappropriate activity on their account. For example, a notification was sent to the email address that was connected to the child's account on a gaming service because of suspected inappropriate activity. However, no further information was provided to the parent/guardian on the context of the situation.

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[31] This is consistent with Ofcom research that explored children's online user ages. It was found in that study (August 2024), 36% of 8–15-year-olds had a user age of 16+, 22% of 8-17's had a user age of 18+. Children who are inputting a user age on their social media profile which is older than their actual age will have access to certain functionalities which may expose them to harmful content. For example, at age 16 a user is able to send direct messages to other users on TikTok.

6 Views to improve online safety

This section details both young people's and professionals' views on how to improve safety on online services, as well as considerations around the steps schools and parents/guardians could take to further improve online safety for children.

6.1   Improvements to functionality of online services

Young people and professionals were able to articulate ways in which they felt exposure to sexualised messages could be reduced.

A consistent view across young people and professionals throughout this research was to **introduce effective age verification across all online services for every user.** It was flagged that the age verification should require either formal identification or a parent/guardian's formal identification. The perceived benefits were that it enabled users to be verified as a 'real' person, children would only be able to access online services when they met the minimum age requirements, and that this would help to flag where an older person was communicating or interacting with a child. Professionals thought that formal identification would act as a deterrence to online groomers, as they would only be allowed to create accounts under their own identity. Young people also suggested effective age verification could help facilitate child-only spaces, that only those who were verified as under 18 could access.

"I think that there should be some way of only being allowed on these platforms once you've been properly identified, and that your identity is then known to the platform. You don't want people to have to disclose where they live and their full name and date of birth to all and sundry, but it should be that the platform holds details of everybody that goes on." **Professional**

"I think something like that might be necessary if they want to have more, like, young people only spaces where they're protected from these things ... you have to be age verified to show that you're a person under a certain age, X, Y, Z... I think you'd have to had moderators that would be able to just, like, lurk in the background and make sure that everything was PG, everything was safe and regulated for everyone" **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Both professionals and young people were of the view that **newly created accounts should be set as private by default, including location settings.** Professionals highlighted that this would ensure a conscious decision for a child to make their account public. Young people described that having the default as private may influence children to think of a private account as being the norm. Given the peer pressure to conform among children, this may help to shift mindset.

This was raised by professionals as being particularly important for online services with public location sharing. Snapchat was identified as having a map feature that participants described as being automatically turned on when an account was created. The user had to manually turn this off in their settings. Young people felt that children may not necessarily be aware to begin with that their location was public. This, combined with a view that children add people they do not necessarily 'know' more freely than adults, made this a particular concern.

"I think one other thing is that I think automatically on Instagram, it just makes your account public, and you have to make it private. Same with Snapchat, it just shares your location with everyone automatically, instead of making it private." **Child, aged 14-17**

Young people felt that **children should only receive messages from individuals that they had accepted as a connection**. They described how this would prevent the more random messages they reported receiving on a frequent basis from those that they did not know, particularly on online services where their profile was public. This would be particularly helpful on online services where, if an account is public, anyone can send you a direct message.

Professionals called for **more effective parental controls for users under 18.** They suggested that children's accounts should be required to have a parent or guardian's contact linked to their account. In some cases, they suggested that if accounts were age verified, then it would allow online services to identify when an adult was interacting with a child, based on the ages of each user. In these circumstances, the online service would be able to contact the parent or guardian to inform them of the contact to allow for them to intervene where necessary.

It was contested by professionals whether moderators on online services would help to monitor where these flags were raised. Some thought that moderators on online services could review flags of interactions between those under 18 and those 18 and older, as well as to review reports of sexualised messages between these users too. However, it was recognised that there would need to be a balance between an individual's safety online and their freedom online.

Young people were of the view that **online service design needs to be focused on being child friendly and safe.** Online services, particularly social media, were perceived as inherently unsafe for children by professionals too. Both young people and professionals thought that key design features could go some way in addressing this. For example, having easy and clear ways to block and report across all online services, and the provision of community advice to young users. For example, one young person referenced that Roblox provided advice on the service to encourage individuals to respect one another. It also included educational materials for younger users to help them to learn how to build friendships.

"Roblox has a big thing about civility, and safety, and about being nice on the platform, and they have lots of educational bits for the younger users, to know how to build friendships, etc… So yes, extra filters, easier blocking, reporting, and then, like, community advice." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

To further ensure safety by design, young people wanted to be involved in the designing and testing of online services and safety features. They were aware that they could get around many safety features, particularly parental controls and thought that their involvement in the design might help to create an environment that worked for them but in a safe way.

"I think another way that we could get more change and more improvements to just social media in general, especially for young people, is getting more young people to test out these apps. So, getting more of our opinions, just being like, 'Do you think this would be safe? Do you think people would still like this and still feel like they're safe?'...I think that's the only way that we can really make a change for it." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

6.2 Improvements to online safety education

Professionals in safeguarding roles within schools highlighted that there were currently multiple ways in which children were receiving education about online safety. These were both informal, through conversations with parents and friends, and more formalised through lessons at school including external speakers and online services themselves providing information online.

While there were multiple types of education on offer, both young people and professionals reported ways in which online safety education could be improved to ensure children are kept safe online.

Both professionals and young people wanted to **ensure awareness and online safety education happens in all schools, including primary schools**. Online literacy was acknowledged to begin from a young age, and therefore safety should be promoted at very early life stages. One participant reflected that she could remember having online safety discussions at primary school and they really 'stuck with her'. Young people highlighted how this would need to go beyond a single session at school as this was an important issue embedded into their lives. Professionals and some young people felt that more frequent education about online safety within schools was necessary to help change attitudes around the normalisation of sexualised messages and the potential dangers online.

Professionals and young people also wanted to **ensure education moves beyond children and is also provided to parents.** Professionals explained how parents' awareness of their children's online activity and the interest they took in it varied significantly. Young people consistently referenced their knowledge as being greater than their parents' because they used different online services to their parents. For example, they were able to get around parental controls where they were in place.

Both professionals and young people highlighted that educating parents would enable them to be more aware of the issues that their children were facing online and could equip them with the tools to help them talk to their children about what they are doing online.

"I'd probably suggest parents also getting educated on why and how these things happen sometimes because it's the apps that have to make sure that they're safe and they're regulated, because even if you're of a certain age and you're allowed to use it, it still has to be safe, there's no excuse for that."
Young adult, aged 18-24

Young people felt that **responsible adults need a better understanding of the nuances of online interactions to better engage with children on the topic.** They explained that trying to encourage children to just say no and instantly block users overlooks the complexities and nuances that they may be feeling, particularly if the person they are speaking to doesn't seem much older than them or is portrayed to be of the same age.

However, the importance of encouraging children to talk about their experiences to parents or trusted adults was highlighted, to allow them to pass the responsibility onto those adults to deal with. This would place less responsibility and pressure on children to respond.

"I think the focus should be to encourage them to speak about it, so we know who those people are that say those awful things to children... The onus should just be on getting them to say, 'This person said this to me.' But not trying to get children to act in certain way or police their behaviour, because children should get to be themselves … And then we know as adults we're reporting that account to the moderators on whatever social media-, or we're just going to shame that person directly." **Young adult, aged 18-24**

Both professionals and young people felt there was a need to **dismantle the narrative that it's normal to receive sexualised messages online**. Both young people and professionals felt that this was particularly important given how normalised it has become for children to see explicit sexual material and content online. Both groups thought that it was key in order to begin to change the culture of what is considered acceptable online.

Instead, they wanted to place an emphasis on building healthy friendships online and more education on how online grooming can happen. They thought there needs to be less emphasis about 'stranger danger', particularly as some online grooming cases do not necessarily start with overtly sexual messages, rather it builds over time as the groomers try to establish a trusting relationship.

"I just think that society should accept that these kinds of things are not normal, and the person who is the victim should not be categorised as a fool…. I just think that the law should be a bit more rigorous"
Child, aged 14-17

One young adult talked **about encouraging 'influencers' to talk about online safety on these online services** as an alternative way to promote education. This may reach children who are using these online services daily.

Appendix

Detailed breakdown of participants.

Table 6.1: A breakdown of participants

Young people	
Age at time of interview	7 x participants aged between 14 and 17 4 x participants aged between 18 and 24 1 x parents of a child aged between 14 and 17
Gender	8 x female participants 2 x male participants 1 x gender-fluid participant
Age at time of experience(s)	All participants reflected on experiences when they were aged 16 and younger.
Type of interaction	Recruited an equal mix of respondents who experienced either receiving sexualised messages from an adult or perceived adult with mutual friends or no mutual friends, and whether they responded or not to these message(s).
Service type	Participants spoke about their experience(s) across a range of online services. In some cases, participants referenced multiple online services, or spoke about multiple experiences, therefore the numbers will be greater than the number of participants. 12 participants experience(s) were on social media or video-sharing services 1 participant experienced sexualised messages on a gaming service
Professionals	
Professionals within charities working with young people with lived experience or working with young people on online safety	5 x participants

Professionals who were safeguarding leads within schools	4 x participants

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