Online abuse: learning from case reviews

What case reviews tell us about online abuse

February 2014

This briefing is based on case reviews published since 2008, where online abuse was a key factor. It pulls together and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

The internet poses new risks to children and presents new challenges for those working to protect them. In these case reviews, children died or were seriously injured in the following ways:

- suicide following cyber bullying
- online grooming leading to sexual abuse and exploitation
- vulnerable parents targeted by abusive adults via dating websites and social networking sites
- children sexually abused in order to share images of child sexual abuse online.

Risk factors

Virtual identities
Social networking sites enable people greater control of how they present themselves. This can be used to manipulate and influence people they are in contact with online.

For example, adults can pose as young people in order to build up relationships with children. Over time these relationships can be used to groom and sexually exploit young people.

In other cases, the internet makes it easier for adults to start relationships with new partners whilst knowing very little about them. This allows abusive adults to target vulnerable single parents, which can put their children at risk.

Issues also arise when professionals make friends with children in their care or with parents through social networking sites. These virtual relationships can compromise the professionalism of staff, and can lead to inappropriate levels of intimacy between professionals and service users.

Unsupervised contact
As children can access the internet via their mobile phones, parents and
professionals often have little or no knowledge of children and young people’s online lives.

For looked after children, whose contact with their birth parents may be supervised for their own protection, this means that they are now able to “secretly” communicate with their families via social networking sites and mobile phones. Unsupervised contact may lead to physical harm, through secret meet ups, or accidental disclosure of location; disruption of placements; and to emotional harm, through finding out unwelcome information about their birth families.

The secrecy around online communications prevents adults from witnessing and intervening to prevent abuse, and children from reporting their concerns to adults.

**Online communities**

Online communication makes it easier to find, contact and interact with other people. This makes it easier for abusive adults to find, and build up relationships with vulnerable children and young people online.

The internet also enables people to connect with a community of like-minded people. This includes people who share a sexual interest in children. By creating a network of contacts with a similar outlook, sexually abusive behaviour can become normalised or even encouraged. Vulnerable adults, with access to children, and a tendency towards abusive behaviour, can be groomed to sexually abuse children and share images with the wider community.

**Ease of sharing information**

Images of children, including self-generated pictures taken by young people, are easily shared with others online. Once a picture has been sent or posted, the sender has no control over who else it is shared with.

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**Learning for policy**

The analysis of case reviews includes a number of important lessons for policy makers.

**E-safety policy and safe use of Information Communications Technology policies**

It is important for all organisations working with children to have an e-safety policy for both children and staff to clarify appropriate and inappropriate behaviour online.

Policies should cover:
- use of mobile phones, digital cameras and other communication
technologies in the work place
- privacy settings on social networking sites, and restrictions on
  connecting with children in professionals' care and their parents
- content which both children and staff are and aren't allowed to access
  online
- how to report upsetting or inappropriate content.

Organisations should also consider appointing an e-safety officer to make
sure the policy is followed.

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**Learning for improved practice**

The analysis of case reviews also highlights a number of learning points for
practice.

**Raising awareness about online safety**

Professionals should receive regular training on online risks, protecting
children online, and reporting concerns. Parents and children should also be
given the information and advice they need to help keep children safe online.

**Making "friends" online and the privacy settings on social networking
sites**

Professionals should not communicate with children through online
networking sites. Professionals should also avoid "friending" the parents of
children in their care as this blurs the lines around maintaining a professional
relationship.

**Managing online relationships**

Professionals or carers should explain to looked after children the physical
and emotional risks of unmediated contact with their birth families, and explain
why contact needs to be supervised and needs to happen in a safe and
neutral environment. Professionals should also engage birth parents about
appropriate methods and levels of contact with their children.

Professionals should encourage children and young people to talk about what
they do online and who they communicate with. The risks involved in online
contact are heightened in cases where children and young people feel they
have to keep their experiences secret.

**Restricting use of phones or digital cameras in the workplace**

Workplaces should have clear rules restricting when and where it is
appropriate for staff to use mobile phones and digital cameras.

**Managing impact of viewing inappropriate images or contact on children
and young people**

A professional's inappropriate online relationship with one child in their care
has an impact on the child’s wider group of friends. The nature of the internet means relationships often have an online audience. Children are less likely to view professionals, especially teachers, as protective influences if they see an inappropriate blurring of professional boundaries. When a school becomes aware of a case of online grooming, it should be discussed with the whole school and children should be given the chance to discuss how they have been affected by it.

Reporting online grooming
When a case of online grooming is identified it should be reported immediately to both the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) centre and to the site on where the grooming took place. The local police force should also be contacted in cases where a child is thought to be at immediate risk of harm.

Using experts in cases involving technology
Images and messages which have been deleted from phones and computers can be retrieved by trained professionals. They are also able to trace the perpetrators as well as other children who have been abused. Cases should always be reported to the police, who have the expertise to investigate the case fully.

Treating online abuse as complex abuse cases
Professionals should remember that cases involving online abuse are rarely restricted to a single victim and perpetrator. The ability of the internet to connect abusers with both multiple victims and abusers means that reports of online abuse should always be treated as complex cases.