

Online abuse

Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the internet. It can happen across any device that's connected to the web, like computers, tablets and mobile phones. And it can happen anywhere online, including:

- social media
- text messages and messaging apps
- emails
- online chats
- online gaming
- live-streaming sites.

Children can be at risk of online abuse from people they know or from strangers. It might be part of other abuse which is taking place offline, like bullying or grooming. Or the abuse might only happen online. Children can also abuse other children online, this can take the form of abusive, harassing, and misogynistic/misandrist messages, the non-consensual making or sharing of nudes or semi-nudes, especially around chat groups, and the sharing of abusive images and pornography to those who do not want to receive such content.

Schools have a dual responsibility when it comes to e-safety: to ensure the school's online procedures keep children and young people safe, and to teach them about online safety, in and outside of school. Your school should foster an open environment in which children and young people are encouraged to ask any questions and participate in an ongoing conversation about the benefits and dangers of the online world.

Types of online abuse

Children and young people might experience different types of online abuse, such as:

- *Cyberbullying* is any type of bullying that happens online. Unlike bullying that takes place offline, online bullying can follow the child wherever they go and it can sometimes feel like there's no escape or safe space.
- *Emotional abuse* is any type of abuse that involves the continual emotional mistreatment of a child and this can happen both on and offline.
- *Grooming* is when someone builds a relationship with a child so they can [sexually abuse](#), [exploit](#) or [traffic](#) them. Children and young people can be groomed online or face-to-face by a stranger or by someone they know. Loneliness, social isolation and family problems may make young people more vulnerable to being groomed online (*NSPCC 2016*). If you're worried a child is being groomed online you should [report it online to CEOP](#).
- *Sexting* is when someone shares sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others, or sends sexual messages. It's online abuse if a child or young person is pressured or coerced into creating or sending these types of images.
- *Sexual abuse* is when a child or young person is forced or tricked into sexual activities. Sexual abuse can happen online - for example, a child could be forced to make, view or share child abuse images or videos or take part in sexual activities on conversations online.
- *Child sexual exploitation* is a type of sexual abuse. When a child is sexually exploited online they may be persuaded or forced to create sexually explicit photos or videos or have sexual conversations.

It can be easier for perpetrators to initiate, maintain and escalate abuse through digital technology because it gives them:

- easier access to children and young people through social media and digital messaging
- anonymity – it's relatively easy to create anonymous profiles on online platforms or pretend to be another child
- children may have a false sense of safety online which means they're more likely to talk to strangers than in the offline world

Filtering and monitoring

Filtering and monitoring systems are used to keep pupils safe when using your school's IT system.

- Filtering systems: block access to harmful sites and content.
- Monitoring systems: identify when a user accesses or searches for certain types of harmful content on school and college devices (it doesn't stop someone accessing it).

Your school is then alerted to any concerning content so you can intervene and respond.

All staff should understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to filtering and monitoring.

Signs of online abuse

A child or young person experiencing abuse online might:

- spend a lot more or a lot less time than usual online, texting, gaming or using social media
- seem distant, upset or angry after using the internet or texting
- be secretive about who they're talking to and what they're doing online or on their mobile phone
- have lots of new phone numbers, texts or email addresses on their mobile phone, laptop or tablet.

Speaking out

A child or young person may be reluctant to speak out about the abuse they've experienced online. They may:

- not understand that they are being abused
- feel dirty and ashamed
- be too embarrassed to share the sexual details of what's happening to them
- be afraid because of threats of violence from the abuser
- have been told by the abuser that they won't be taken seriously
- have established an emotional attachment with the abuser and don't want to get them into trouble

Who's at risk?

Any child who uses the internet can be at risk of online abuse. It's important parents, as well as staff in schools, are aware of the risks and talk to their child about [staying safe online](#).

Pre- and early teens are an especially vulnerable age for children online. From 11-12, children start to explore and take risks online, but they haven't yet developed the skills needed to recognise danger or build resilience against things that might upset them (*Munro, 2011; Livingstone and Palmer, 2012*).

Children aged 9-16 are particularly vulnerable to:

- seeing sexual images online
- seeing online content that promotes potentially harmful behaviour, such as pro-anorexia or self-harm sites
- being bullied online (*Mascheroni and Cuman, 2014*).

If a child reveals online abuse

It can be difficult to know what to say and do if a child tells you they're being abused online. They might not realise what's happening is wrong. And they might even blame themselves.

If a child talks to you about online abuse it's important to:

- listen carefully to what they're saying
- let them know they've done the right thing by telling you
- tell them it's not their fault
- say you'll take them seriously
- don't confront the alleged abuser
- explain what you'll do next
- report what the child has told you as soon as possible.

What school staff should do if they have concerns about a child

If staff members have any concerns about a child they will need to decide what action to take.

- If you think a child is in immediate danger, contact the police on 999. If you're worried about a child but they are not in immediate danger, you should share your concerns.
- Follow your organisational child protection procedures. Any concern about a child should always trigger a conversation with the Designated Safeguarding Lead to agree a course of action, although any staff member can make a referral to children's social care.
- Contact the NSPCC Helpline on [0800 800 5000](tel:08008005000) or by emailing help@nspcc.org.uk. Our trained professionals will talk through your concerns with you and give you expert advice.
- Contact your local child protection services. Their contact details can be found on the website for the local authority the child lives in.
- Contact the police.
- If your concern is about online sexual abuse, you can make a report to the [Child Exploitation and Online Protection \(CEOP\)](#) command.

Responding to cases of online abuse

When responding to cases of online abuse, it's important for adults to understand the impact it can have on a young person's wellbeing. They should:

- listen calmly to what the child has to say
- remember that the young person may be embarrassed and/or ashamed
- be non-judgmental and make sure the child knows that abuse is never their fault.

It's also important for adults to understand that online and offline abuse are often entwined and ask tactful questions when the child is ready to understand the context of the abuse. This will enable them to provide the child with the right support.

Parents should be informed about cases of online abuse unless to do so would put a child at further risk of harm. They may need additional support to understand what has happened and how best to help their child. The decision to speak to parents will be taken by the Designated Safeguarding Lead, so ensure that you report your concerns as soon as possible.

In cases where the child or young person has gone to the police about online abuse, it's important for them to:

- fully explain the legal process in a way the child or young person can understand
- be friendly, reduce formalities as much as possible and make the child feel comfortable
- offer the child choice where possible, for example:
- how they want to give evidence
- the gender of the key police officer(s) involved
- what other professionals they would like to be involved
- provide a consistent officer to work with the child throughout the case
- keep in contact with the child and their family regularly and provide regular updates on the progress of the case (*Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017*).

Children who have experienced online abuse need to be provided with ongoing support.

Online behaviour for staff and volunteers

Everyone who works or volunteers for your school should follow an online code of conduct. This includes:

- not engaging with children on social networking sites or through mobile devices
- keeping personal information private online
- considering the long term implications of content posted online
- not uploading or posting inappropriate offensive or illegal content on any online space.

Additional guidance and further reading

- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/online-abuse/>
- The NSPCC Helpline is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- [E-safety for schools | NSPCC Learning](#)
- Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges (September 2026)
- [Teaching online safety in schools](#)
This guidance outlines how schools can ensure their pupils understand how to stay safe and behave online as part of existing curriculum requirements. It complements existing and forthcoming subjects including Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education, Health Education, Citizenship and Computing. It does not imply additional content or teaching requirements
- Educate against hate [Educate Against Hate - Prevent Radicalisation & Extremism](#)
- Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (June 2026)
- Childline
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111