

Online Child Sexual Abuse Practitioner Briefing

Introduction:

The internet is a fantastic tool which, when used safely, helps us to learn, interact with others and aids us to perform a lot of our day-to-day activities. Its usage and applications will only continue to grow so it becomes more ingrained in our everyday lives and functionality. 'Child Pornography' is not a term practitioners should be using; it is Child Sexual Abuse & it is a crime. Pornography is a term used for adults engaging in consensual sexual acts. When children are involved, it is not pornography. Using the incorrect terminology can trivialize the sexual abuse & exploitation of children and young people.

Understanding Child Sexual Abuse: Online Child Sexual Abuse (OCSA)

OCSA includes abuse that occurs wholly or partially online, such as:

- Grooming via social media, gaming platforms, or messaging apps
- Sexual coercion, blackmail, or threats
- Non-consensual creation, sharing, or possession of sexual images or videos of children.
- Live-streamed abuse
- Encouraging or pressuring a child to self-produce sexual content

Online abuse frequently overlaps with offline risk and should never be treated as lower harm.

Recognising Indicators of OCSA - Indicators may include (but are rarely definitive on their own):

- Anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, self-blame, flashbacks or intrusive thoughts, difficulties sleeping, nightmares, extreme tiredness, social withdrawal, eating disorder or eating difficulties.
- Sexualised behaviour or language that is not age appropriate.
- Withdrawal, aggression, or sudden changes in behaviour.
- Fear of specific people, places, or online activity.
- Secrecy around devices; distress when access is restricted, excessive online use, particularly at night, Use of multiple or hidden accounts.
- Gifts, money, or devices from unknown sources.

Practitioners should consider cumulative risk, patterns, and context rather than isolated signs.

Working with Online Abuse and Digital Evidence

- Treat online abuse as real-world serious harm, not "virtual" risk or not a lifestyle issue
- Do not view or forward sexual images of children. Preserve evidence: do not delete messages or images unless advised by police.
- Where appropriate, advise parents/carers not to contact/confront alleged perpetrators.
- Use specialist resources (e.g. CEOP reporting routes) as part of safeguarding responses.
- Assess risks related to child on child abuse, coercion, and ongoing contact.
- Child on Child abuse should be considered within a contextual safeguarding framework, recognising power, coercion, and exploitation.
- CSA and OCSA are serious safeguarding issues with long-term impacts.
- Children may not disclose clearly or immediately and absence of disclosure does not equal absence of abuse.
- Online abuse is often hidden and ongoing; safety planning must include the digital/ online environment.

Responding to a Disclosure or Concern

If a child discloses abuse:

- Stay calm and listen; do not express shock or disbelief.
- Do not ask leading or investigative questions.
- Reassure the child they have done the right thing.
- Explain, in age-appropriate terms, what will happen next and who will be told.
- Record the child's words verbatim as soon as possible.

Immediate Actions

- Follow [local safeguarding procedures](#).
- [Make a referral to children's social care](#) and, where appropriate, the police.
- Consider immediate safety and protective measures, including digital safety for OCSA. Do not attempt to investigate or view abusive images yourself.

What are nudes/semi nudes?

'Nudes and semi-nudes' refer to the sending or posting of nude or semi-nude images, videos, or live streams by young people under the age of 18 online. This could be via social media, gaming platforms, chat apps, or forums. Alternative terms are often used children, for example 'dick pics' or 'pics.' Many practitioners may refer to 'nudes and semi-nudes' as youth produced sexual imagery, 'sexting,' self-generated images or sexualised communication.

[Guidance](#) coordinated by the UK Council for Internet Safety's Education Working Group in partnership with the NPCC. [One-page summary](#) on how to manage incidents. College of Policing [Briefing note](#) on how police should respond to reports of young people taking and sharing nude or semi-nude images.

[Professionals Online Safety Helpline](#) - Free and independent advice for professionals and volunteers working with children and young people, signposting, advice, and mediation to resolve online safety issues staff face about themselves, such as protecting professional identity and online harassment, or problems affecting young people, for example cyber-bullying or 'sexting' issues.

For more information.

[Child Exploitation and Online Protection \(CEOP\)](#) - Part of the National Crime Agency offers guidance relating to keeping families safe. They provide advice for practitioners working with children/young people/parents and carers. If someone you know has experienced online sexual abuse or you have concerns this is happening to someone please report it using this [link](#).

[National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(NSPCC\)](#)- [Keeping children safe online](#) and [How to recognise the signs and impact of cyberbullying](#) and if a child (under the age of 18) reports that sexual imagery has made its way to the internet you can report via this [link](#) where [Childline](#) and [Internet Watch Foundation \(IWF\)](#) will work to have this image removed wherever possible.

[Marie Collins Foundation](#) works directly with children, young people, and families to enable their recovery following sexual abuse involving technology.

[Lucy Faithful Foundation \(LFF\)](#) - Work to prevent abuse.

[Online Safety Act: explainer](#) - The Online Safety Act 2023 (the Act) is a new set of laws that protects children and adults online.

[Interim Code of Practice on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and abuse](#) provides detailed guidance for companies on actions they can take to tackle online child sexual abuse that occurs on their services or platforms.