Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership

Sadistic Online Exploitation: Key Insights from the GSCP Briefing

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What Is Sadistic Online Exploitation?

Sadistic online exploitation refers to a disturbing trend where groups—mainly teenage boys—use online platforms to share and encourage extreme, violent, and abusive content. Their main motivation is not sexual gratification, but to gain "clout" or notoriety among peers. This behaviour is spreading across popular platforms like Discord and Telegram, making it a growing concern for professionals working with children and young people.

Why Is This Happening?

- **Widespread Internet Access:** Over 5.5 billion people worldwide are online, with children accessing the internet at younger ages than ever before.

- **Social Exclusion:** Many offenders are socially isolated, have negative school experiences, or are neurodiverse. The COVID-19 pandemic increased online isolation for many young people.

- **Online Radicalisation:** Exposure to extreme content and ideologies online can lead to harmful behaviours, including misogyny and violence.

- **Lack of Positive Alternatives:** For some, these online groups provide a sense of belonging and excitement missing from their offline lives.

How Does It Manifest?

- **'Com Groups':** These are online communities where members share extreme material to impress each other. Offending includes:

  o Sharing child sexual abuse material

  o Encouraging self-harm (e.g., carving group symbols into the body)

  o Promoting violence, racism, and misogyny

  o Engaging in cybercrime (e.g., hacking, DDoS attacks)

- **Victims:** Often young girls, but also siblings, friends, and even pets. Some victims have been coerced into self-harm or suicide, sometimes live-streamed for others' entertainment.

Who Is at Risk?

- **Victims:** Children with mental health challenges, neurodiversity, body image issues, or those who are socially excluded.

- **Offenders:** Typically teenage boys who are socially isolated and highly skilled online.

- **Marginalised Groups:** Children from communities with less access to digital literacy or support may be at greater risk.

What Are the Warning Signs?

- **For Girls:** Unexplained self-harm, especially with symbols or numbers; secrecy about online activities; sudden interest in extreme or occult content.

- **For Boys:** Sudden new online friendships, obsession with certain online groups, unexplained injuries to pets or siblings, or involvement in hacking or cybercrime.

What Can Professionals and Parents Do?

- **Show Interest:** Ask children about their online activities and who they interact with.

- **Look for Signs:** Be alert to changes in behaviour, secrecy, or unexplained injuries.

- **Promote Digital Literacy:** Encourage safe and responsible internet use.

- **Multi-Agency Collaboration:** Work together across education, social care, and law enforcement to identify and support at-risk children.

- **Training:** Ensure staff are trained to recognise and respond to these risks.

What Is Being Done?

- **Law Enforcement:** Joint task forces are working to disrupt offenders and take down harmful online groups.

- **Prevention:** Efforts are underway to develop better early intervention and education programmes, but more research and resources are needed.

- **Community Engagement:** Ongoing dialogue with professionals, parents, and communities is essential to keep children safe.

Final Thoughts

Sadistic online exploitation is a complex and evolving threat. It requires a coordinated response from professionals, parents, and communities. By staying informed, vigilant, and proactive, we can help protect children and young people from harm.