

# Online Sexually Coerced Extortion

Right now, children are increasingly being targeted online for sexually coerced extortion, but this type of exploitation and the impact it has on children and young people is often under-recognised. Even when it is recognised, it is commonly responded to as an isolated incident. This means that victims are not receiving the safeguarding and support they need.

We are working to shine a light on this issue, to equip professionals to know what this type of exploitation looks like and what support is available.

## What is online sexually coerced exploitation?

It is a type of exploitation which is initiated in online spaces. The model involves victims being groomed to create images or videos of a sexual nature, often involving nudity and intimate acts. Once the perpetrator has received these images, or recorded videos of the victim, they then threaten that this content will be shared unless the victim complies with their demands.

In some cases, the perpetrator may use the threat of sharing these images to sexually exploit the victim further. However, a model we are increasingly aware of is where victims are told they must pay the perpetrator to avoid having

### Reframing the term 'sextortion' to 'sexually coerced extortion'

This type of exploitation is often referred to as 'sextortion', but it is important to emphasise the role coercion plays in this type of exploitation and to remind professionals that this is a form of child sexual abuse.

**Children cannot consent to their own abuse** and should never be held responsible for this or any other model of exploitation. Evidence so far suggests that not all these crimes are motivated by sexual gratification, but rather that the financial aspect may play a key role.

This is not highlighted if 'sextortion' is used.

their images publicly shared.

There are also concerns about whether victims may be pushed into other acts for the financial gain of the perpetrator, like fraud. There are often connections between sexual exploitation and financial exploitation.

This document focuses specifically on the impact for children and young people, but this type of harm also impacts adults too. It is important, therefore, to take a developmental approach to supporting any individual impacted by this type of exploitation.

## How does online sexually coerced extortion happen?

According to police reports and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF),<sup>1</sup> teenage boys are currently the most common victims of this type of exploitation, with perpetrators often posing as teenage girls.

This marks a significant shift in both the identification of boys experiencing sexual abuse and their reaching out for support. However, we would encourage professional curiosity, as young people of all genders can be victims of this type of abuse.

Across the North East, North West, and Yorkshire, the majority of victims identified have been over 13, but there is concern that younger children are also increasingly being targeted.

Generally, victims are targeted on social media or via gaming platforms. A child is tricked into believing that they are speaking to someone (where the victim is a boy, this is usually a girl) either their own age or slightly older, when in reality the person is often older and may not match the gender they describe themselves as.

This perpetrator often sends explicit images first before requesting similar images, or time on video call in return. During this interaction, screenshots are taken of the child naked or performing intimate or sexual acts. The perpetrator then sends the child a message demanding payment in return for not sharing their images.

Examples shared with The Children's Society include ransom amounts between £10 and £2,500, with some children paying up to £1,000 to keep their images private. The perpetrator will often demand that the child makes payment into a bank account online, but in some cases they have asked for gift cards or used an app to take money.

## What is the impact on children and young people?

As well as the potential financial harm to a child, the mental health consequences of online sexually coerced extortion are enormous.

Nationally, there have been numerous deaths as a result of suicide linked to cases of sexually coerced extortion and professionals have noted experiences where victims stopped attending school as a result of the anxiety and shame caused by perpetrators. Such isolation can put the child at further risk of exploitation and harm.

The Children's Society has received reports of victims of sexually coerced extortion then being forced to commit criminal acts, including experience of exploitation as part of the county lines model. Some professionals feel that the lack of support for children once they do disclose can exacerbate the negative feelings they are experiencing.

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<sup>1</sup> Internet Watch Foundation, 'Hotline Report 'Shocking' Rise in The Sextortion Of Boys'. Available from: [iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/hotline-reports-shocking-rise-in-the-sex-tortion-of-boys](https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/hotline-reports-shocking-rise-in-the-sex-tortion-of-boys)

## What can you do?

- Look out for potential indicators. These may include a child suddenly becoming withdrawn or displaying other sudden changes of behaviour including anger and aggression, avoiding school or other social situations, showing emotional distress, having less money than usual or expressing suicidal thoughts.<sup>2</sup>
- Build a trusting, professional relationship with the child to enable them to disclose if needed but without the expectation that they should.
- Encourage parents and carers to have regular conversations with their children about their online lives.
- Remaining judgement free is important. Many children who have been exploited this way have experienced victim blaming, which is then weaponised by perpetrators to exacerbate feelings of shame and further isolate and abuse the child. Be understanding and reassuring. See [our language guide](#) for more support.
- Make sure that you know how to report any concerns you have and that you are clear with the child about what the next steps will be. Keep them updated over time where needed.
- As part of the conversation with the child, you will need to explore whether it is safe for them to break off contact or whether this could result in further danger, including [debt bondage](#).
- Be aware that abuse may not stop even if a child has paid the perpetrator and consider whether the child may have been coerced to share any friends' or peers' details.
- Share any relevant evidence and intelligence with police and local safeguarding arrangements and advocate for disruption tactics to be put in place. This can stop the perpetrator from further exploiting the child or moving on to exploit a different one.
- Consider what support services may be available in your local area. If nothing is available, how can you advocate for the need for these services?
- Talk to young people about internet safety, methods of reporting safely and anonymously (including through Report Remove),<sup>3</sup> and encourage them to know that if they disclose they will be supported and in no way blamed for their action. Make sure that these educational conversations do not make gendered assumptions about who might be targeted, so that all children experiencing this abuse are identified and get the right support.

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<sup>2</sup> Internet Watch Foundation, 'Sexually Coerced Extortion or 'Sextortion' Help & Support'. Available from: [iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion](http://iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion)

<sup>3</sup> Childline, Report Remove. See: [childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/](http://childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/).

## Further Guidance and Support

[Report Harmful content here](#)

[Get images removed here](#)

[Report abuse to the IWF](#)

[Report concerns about online abuse](#)

[See support available to professionals](#)

[Learn more about responding to child exploitation](#)

If you have any feedback on this guidance, or if you are interested in being part of the Northern (Cumbria, Northumbria, Durham Cleveland, Yorkshire) working group around online sexually coerced extortion hosted by The Children's Society, then please contact [prevention@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:prevention@childrenssociety.org.uk)