Knowledge Resource 3:

# Understanding impacts of online child sexual victimisation

This resource contains information that may be distressing for some readers. This resource focuses on *online child sexual victimisation*. In this practice resource we focus on the outcomes of two types of online sexual victimisation: nonconsensual sharing of sexual images of a child (by any person) and sexual solicitation of a child (by an adult). When we talk about a *child or young person*, we mean a person aged under 18 years. We recognise and acknowledge the many diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, abilities, and genders of children.

## Prevalence of child sexual victimisation

The **Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS)** showed that online child sexual victimisation is very common in Australia. Around 1 in 13 children and young people (7.6%) experience non-consensual sharing of sexual images, and nearly one in 5 (17.7%) experience adult sexual solicitation.[1] The ACMS also showed the majority of children and young people who experience these incidents tell someone about them.[2] Our connected knowledge resources provide further information about these topics, including how to seek help.[3-4]

## Impacts of online child sexual victimisation

Because there are many different ways in which children and young people can be sexually victimised online, the impacts can also be different. It can be extremely distressing for children and young people. Some common feelings include distress, embarrassment, self-blame, shame, anger, rage, fear, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. They may experience trouble sleeping (and may have nightmares), difficulty concentrating, lose interest in normal activities, withdraw from relationships, including with parents/carers, siblings, and friends.

The ACMS explored whether these two types of experiences are associated with mental disorders (e.g., depression), and health risk behaviours (e.g., self-harm). These serious consequences were assessed using strict criteria to ensure accurate measurement. The analysis found that:[5]

- **Nonconsensual sharing of sexual images of the child is particularly harmful. These children and young people are substantially more likely to attempt suicide, engage in self-harm, and to smoke. They are also more likely to suffer depression.**
- **Online sexual solicitation by an adult was not as harmful, although it was associated with self-harm.**

The ACMS did not measure all possible outcomes. For example, we did not measure symptoms of distress, subclinical anxiety, or other difficulties managing daily life (e.g., handling relationships, school, and regular activities). It is likely that significant distress is caused by these experiences of online child sexual victimisation, especially nonconsensual sharing of sexual images. In addition, adult solicitation should not be minimised when considering outcomes for the child, especially when the child is young, or if the solicitation is repeated, aggressive, or explicit. All these experiences should be taken very seriously.

# Supporting children and young people's health needs after online sexual victimisation

Parents/carers and other trusted adults in children's lives can take action to support the health needs of children and young people, and help build their capacity and confidence for safety online. Here are some key tips:

## Supporting health needs

- Letting them know you believe them, and for parents/carers that you love them no matter what has happened. Receiving positive support and validation is vital to reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes; similarly, unsupportive or hostile responses from parents can exacerbate the situation.

- Reassuring them and reinforcing that they did the right thing by speaking up.

- Listening without judgement and paying full attention to them when they want to talk about what has happened.

- Access other National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse Practice Tools about Responding to children's disclosure of sexual abuse[6] and Responding and taking action[7]

- Access health practitioner support to help the child or young person process their experiences, understand their emotions and build resilience.

- Encourage them to remain engaged with things they like to do and maintain their normal protective environment e.g., connections with friends and meaningful activities.

- Watch out for signs that they are struggling, for example, they might seem depressed or describe feeling hopeless or worthless, be alert for indicators of self-harm, dangerous risk taking, and talk about ending their life.

## Helping build their capacity and confidence for safety online

- Build your skills by accessing other National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse Practice Tools about Responding and taking action.[7]

- Ask who and what helps them to feel safe.

- Have ongoing age appropriate conversations with children and young people about online safety, including about peer-to-peer consent and respectful relationships.

- As appropriate to the circumstances (e.g., their age), discuss safe online practices and implementing realistic approaches.

- Empower them by sharing strategies for how to avoid unwanted acts and how to respond to different situations, and about how to seek help if it is required.

- Keep open lines of communication and letting them know you are on their side.

# Resources:

Resources on the eSafety and ACCCE websites include videos, posters, conversation cards, fact sheets, and resources for family support services. Here are some specific links:

- Online child sexual abuse: https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/issues-and-advice/protecting-children-from-sexual-abuse-online/resources

- Technology-facilitated abuse of children: https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/domestic-family-violence/support-service-resources/supporting-kids-dealing-with-tech-abuse

- Sexual extortion: https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/image-based-abuse/deal-with-sextortion and https://www.accce.gov.au/sextortionhelp

- Online child sexual exploitation: https://www.accce.gov.au/help-and-support/what-is-online-child-exploitation

- Online grooming: https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents/issues-and-advice/grooming-or-unwanted-contact

# If you need support, please contact...

# Help and Support

**Lifeline**

13 11 14
SMS 0477 13 11 14
24/7 Crisis Support

**13YARN**

13 92 76
24/7 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Crisis Support

**1800RESPECT**

1800 737 732
24/7 Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Counselling Service

**Blue Knot Helpline and Redress Support Service**

1300 657 380
9am-5pm/7 days

**Kids Helpline**

1800 55 1800
24/7 Kids, Teens and Young Adults Support Service

**QLife**

1800 184 527
3pm – midnight/7 days
An LGBTIQ+ peer support and referral for people in Australia

*If you are in immediate danger phone 000*

### Online resources

Kids Helpline webchat counselling
https://kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/webchat-counselling
(for 5–25-year-olds)

Lifeline Crisis Support (chat online)
https://www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat/

eSafety Commissioner
https://www.esafety.gov.au/

Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation
https://www.accce.gov.au/report

**Headspace**
1800 650 890
https://headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support/
(for 12–25-year-olds)

**Suicide Call Back Service**
1300 659 467
Online web chat (available 24/7)

# Sources

1. Walsh, K., Mathews, B., Parvin, K., Smith, R., Burton, M., Nicholas, M., ... & Tran, N. (2025). Prevalence and characteristics of online child sexual victimisation: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 160*, 107186. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107186

2. Mathews, B., Walsh, K., Finkelhor, D., Parvin, K., Burton, M., Nicholas, M., … & Flynn, A. (2025). Disclosure of online child sexual victimization: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *165*, 107493. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107493

3. Walsh, K., Mathews, B., and the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. (2025). Knowledge Resource 1: Understanding online child sexual victimisation. Accessible at www.acms.au

4. Walsh, K., Mathews, B., and the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. (2025). Knowledge Resource 2: What you can do after online child sexual victimisation. Accessible at www.acms.au

5. Mathews, B., Parvin, K., Walsh, K., Finkelhor, D., Napier, S., Burton, M., … & Flynn, A. (2025). Online child sexual victimization and associated health risk behaviours and mental disorders: Findings from a national survey in Australia (under review).

6. National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. Practice Tool on Responding to children's disclosure of sexual abuse

7. National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse. Practice Tool on Responding and taking action