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IWF Internet Watch Foundation

Working together to stop child sexual abuse online

"It's normal these days." Self-generated child sexual abuse fieldwork findings report

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Introduction

'Self-generated' child sexual abuse material (SG-CSAM) is an emerging online problem that has increased dramatically due to the easy availability of smartphone camera technology, and the fact that online access has become more personal, private and less supervised (WHO, 2022). This has been compounded by long periods of lockdown at home because of Covid-19 (Siste et al., 2021). SG-CSAM encompasses intimate or sexually explicit content created by and featuring children below the age of eighteen. These images can be taken and shared intentionally by children and young people but in many cases they are the result of online grooming, coercion or blackmail (sextortion) (INHOPE, 2022).

This research project was funded by the Oak Foundation and is a collaboration between the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region (PIER) and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF). The overarching aim of the project was to develop an evidence base to inform the design and delivery of a targeted prevention campaign relating to children and young people's online safety and behaviour. There were three objectives to achieve this aim, and this report concentrates on the first:

1. Investigate what works in approaches to public awareness campaigns which might be effective in educating children and their parents/carers and educators[1] about SG-CSAM.

2. Use this to inform the design and delivery of a targeted public campaign, or campaigns, to educate and raise awareness of this issue, influence behaviour and reduce SG-CSAM related harm.

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign(s).

Social media is an intrinsic and pervasive aspect of children and young people's daily lives. Understanding the issues and challenges they face - as well as how they perceive, make sense of, and navigate them - is a crucial part of developing an effective campaign that is underpinned by a safeguarding focus. Central to the evidence base developed during this project are the voices and experiences of children and young people, parents/carers and educators. Learning from these people, particularly children and young people, will contribute to developing responses that are sensitive to, and informed by them. The purpose of this report is to mark the end of the research phase and present the key findings.

Terminology

Currently, the term 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material (SG-CSAM), although contested, is still the main term utilised by academics, support groups and expert agencies to describe this type of CSAM as including:

> " … *a broad span of images or videos from voluntarily 'self-generated' material that is consensually shared between adolescent peers (where harm is typically*

[1] We have used the term educators as both teachers and non-teaching staff, such as Pastoral and Wellbeing leads, were included in the focus groups.

> *caused when imagery is reshared against a young person's wishes); to coerced 'self-generated' sexual material – which includes grooming, pressure, or manipulation to share material.*" (WeProtect, 2023a:17).

As a result, for the purposes of this project and its potential impact on policy and practice, we continue using this term but in full recognition that it is contentious and complex. The term 'self-generated' carries implicit victim-blaming connotations, which we reject because it could prevent children from disclosing harmful experiences, as well as influence how professionals may respond (Jay, 2014). The term also fails to capture the complexities involved in children and young people's online behaviour and their understanding in relation to sharing images, such as non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexually explicit material, which can occur in several contexts: images consensually obtained are then shared with others or posted without consent; sexual images are taken or obtained without consent or through coercion, pressure or deception; images consensually obtained are then used to humiliate, denigrate, threaten or extort money, favours or additional sexual images (often termed sextortion or sexual extortion (Greijer and Doek, 2016). In relation to under 18s, these contexts all constitute child sexual abuse (CSA).

There are currently debates regarding the use of other terminology, for example 'first person produced' (APPG on Social Media and UK Safer Internet Centre, 2021), and 'non-consensual nude image' (NCNI) (Barton-Crosby et al., 2022). However, these terms fail to account for videos, and for pictures which involve the commission of sexual acts, which are the most dominant media for this type of sexual abuse (WeProtect, 2023a). The debates surrounding this term capture the importance of using the most appropriate, accurate and accessible language. It also illustrates how language can often be in a state of flux until consensus is achieved.

The wider context of the research project

It is estimated that globally, one in three internet users is below the age of 18 and young people from 15 to 24 years represent the most prevalent users of the internet and digital platforms (WHO, 2022). Karlsson and Josephson (2021:11) highlight that because "children's digital lives have changed and expanded fundamentally over the past ten years", internet usage is now embedded in the lives of children, who themselves do not draw a distinction between their 'online' and 'offline' lives. Online social norms around behaviour and expectations have now developed that differ to offline social norms around behaviour and expectations. One of the manifestations of the digitalisation of children and young people's sexuality is the generation and online sharing of sexual content of themselves, commonly referred to as 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material.

Research is demonstrating that despite its many positives, the internet can be a dangerous place for children and young people, with over 50% of respondents to a global survey reporting that they had experienced 'online sexual harm' as children (WeProtect, 2023a). CSAM is a significant and complex threat to children and young people with over 99.5% of all reports to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) relating to CSAM (NCMEC, 2023). In 2022,

NCMEC received 88.3 million files and of these 49.4 million were images and 37.7 million were videos (NCMEC, 2023). In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation confirmed 199,367 cases of SG-CSAM globally. For the first time, SG-CSAM of girls aged 7-10 years was more prevalent than content created when the abuser was present. This coincided with a rise in SG-CSAM of girls aged 3-6 years, and an increasing number of Category A images[2]. Most victims of SG-CSAM were girls aged 11 to 13, and whilst this figure has reduced from 81% in 2021 to 64% in 2022, it still represents a 1058% increase since 2019 (IWF, 2023a). This is perhaps unsurprising when considering recent findings on the sharing of intimate pictures, often termed 'nudes', 'pics', dick pics', and 'sexy pics' (Karlsson and Josephson, 2021; WeProtect, 2023b). In 2020, Thorn and the Benenson Strategy Group found that 1 in 5 teenage girls and 1 in 10 teenage boys reported having shared nude photographs of themselves. Similarly, ECPAT Sweden (Karlsson and Josephson, 2021) found that 48% of their sample of almost 13,000 young people had shared nudes, with many referring to this as a positive or even empowering experience, which was supported by earlier research by Liong and Cheng (2019).

The sharing of intimate and sexual images is undoubtedly becoming increasingly common in relationships, and although many respondents in these studies recognised a risk of 'non-consensual distribution', this was essentially considered a normal part of sexual exploration and intimate relationship building (Revealing Reality, 2022). However, youth surveys have also found that unwanted requests for, and misuse of, sexual pictures primarily come from peers (Karlsson and Josephson, 2021).

Whilst knowledge relating to specific risk factors associated with SG-CSAM is limited, research has found that being a girl, and being between the ages of 11-13 increases risk (IWF, 2020). More broadly, research by the WHO (2020) found that children who seek out support online in relation to the development of their sexual identity, and show an interest in accessing pornographic materials online, are also more at risk of victimisation. Age is also considered a risk factor. The IWF (2018) found that children being exploited on commercial sites are getting younger, and other research also found that the most actively traded SG-CSAM involved prepubescent victims and was more likely to involve family members (Seto et al., 2018).

UNICEF (2020) highlights specific environmental factors that increase vulnerability to online CSA, including: social isolation; parental conflict; having a history of physical abuse; mental health diagnoses such as depression; bullying; poverty; and family disintegration. Seto et al. (2023) discuss demographic factors which may increase the likelihood of young people's involvement in 'sexting', which they define as 'sending/receiving sexual images or videos or texts' (2023:1). Analysing existing research, they found that gender or belonging to a sexual minority could be considered a potential indicator, with young people from the LGBTQ+ community up to 3-4 times more likely to engage in sexting. Contrary to the UNICEF (2020) research, Seto et al. (2023) found that young people from lower

[2] These are considered the worst type of CSAM images in UK law.

income households were less likely to 'sext' (Kim et al., 2020), as were girls who defined themselves as religious (Strassberg et al., 2017).

Awareness and understanding of these findings can inform the development of protective factors that can be used to help support and empower children and young people when online. It is within this context that this research and report aims to provide evidenced-based guidance to the IWF to develop a prevention campaign for children and young people to increase their knowledge and understanding of potential online harms in a way that supports them to navigate their online worlds safely.

Methodology

Ethical approval

An application was approved by the AHESS Faculty Research Ethics Committee (ETH2223-1585).

Research Questions

The following research questions formed the focus of the research with the aim of using the findings to inform the campaign development phase of the project.

1. What approaches to prevention campaigns are effective in reducing the production and distribution of 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material?

a. What does internationally published literature say regarding 'what works' in prevention campaigns?

b. What can key actors—children/young people, parents/educators, and perpetrators—tell us regarding 'what might work'?

Data collection

In order to answer the above research questions, we needed to review the existing evidence base and undertake new empirical research to plug the gaps. To do this we used the following data collection methods.

Literature review[3] to address RQ 1(a)
We conducted desk-based research to review the existing evidence base on self-generated material, taking a systematic approach. The scoping review also sought to identify resources and campaigns aimed at children, parents, and educators related to self-generated material (see separate report).

Focus groups to address RQ 1(b)
We ran focus groups with three different stakeholder groups: children, parents and educators.

Participant recruitment and procedure

Participants were recruited via the assistance of a number of gatekeepers, which included Heads of Education Trusts; Youth Officers at various Dioceses; Cabinet

[3] PIER (2023) 'Literature Review: What approaches to prevention campaigns are effective in reducing the production and distribution of 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material?'

members for Education, and Education leads from Essex County Council. After making initial introductions on our behalf, the research team liaised directly with the schools, often meeting in person to discuss the research and promote the benefits of participation. Schools were selected on the basis that they represented a mix of characteristics and demographic groups.

The focus groups with children and young people, and teachers and educators, were conducted face to face within the school setting. The focus groups with parents were conducted remotely using MS Teams. Sessions lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Focus groups with children were guided by the following questions:

- Who has heard of sexting, sending nudes, dick pics, videos?
- Have you had any assemblies, awareness training on these things?
- Have parents/carers spoken to you?
- What did you learn?
- Who has heard of self-generated child sexual abuse material?
- Explore their understanding of the three main types using short case study scenarios (consensual creating; non-consensual creating and coerced creation)
- Have you seen any resources which have helped you understand how to keep safe online and what could happen if you share pictures?

Focus groups with parents and educators were guided by the following questions:

- Who has heard of sexting, sending nudes, dick pics etc?
- Have you had spoken to your children about these things?
- Why? Why not?
- Who's heard of self-generated child sexual abuse material?
- Explore the three main types using the three case study scenarios and explore their understanding (consensual creating; non-consensual creating and coerced creating)
- Probe for any experiences of these
- Are there unique challenges faced by any particular group of parents/caregivers?
    - E.g., non-English speaking families, ethnicities, socio-economic positioning, large vs small families, religion/faith, etc.

Recruitment to focus groups was significantly more difficult than envisaged. Many schools were reluctant to be involved with the research due to the 'sensitive' subject matter, and those schools which did allow access struggled to recruit parents and young people to focus groups. The reluctance to discuss CSA is a well evidenced phenomenon (Ofsted et al., 2020; Prikhidko and Kenny, 2021; York et al., 2021) and is in part driven by a lack of awareness of its prevalence, and stereotypical ideas about victims and perpetrators (Hill and Diaz, 2021; Alaggia et al., 2019). It is considered unpalatable for general discussion and sadly this has

contributed to the dramatic rise in children and young people involved in SG-CSAM.

In order to increase our sample size, we worked with Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services (ECVYS), a charity which aims to amplify the voices, presence, and joint working of the voluntary youth sector in Essex. Part of the work of ECVYS is to involve children and young people in research and ensure their views are heard, utilising 'Listening Sessions' that include children and young people who attend a wide range of youth groups across the county and are encouraged to explore and engage in discussions around particular issues. These discussion sessions are essentially focus groups, and in this research, to ensure the participants felt comfortable, the sessions were run by a staff member from the respective youth club or group.

We co-designed a session plan to explore:

- Children and young people's views and perceptions of SG-CSAM.

- The issue using three separate case studies examining consensual creating, non-consensual creating and coerced creating.
- Their awareness of any related campaigns, and their thoughts and ideas on what might work in prevention efforts.
- Their views on current terminology.

Participants
In total, 34 focus groups were conducted: 24 with children and young people; 5 with parents/carers and 5 with educators.

Children and young people
In total, 307 children and young people took part. All participants were recruited through Essex based youth groups or schools.

Twenty youth groups took part and included police cadets, scouts and guides, church groups, young carer groups, a LGBTIQI+ group and groups for children and young people with special educational needs (which included young adults over the age of 18 years).

Four different schools took part: an independent day and boarding school; a Catholic State Secondary School; a specialist school for boys with additional social, emotional and mental health needs, and a school for children with speech, language and communication needs, which are both referred to as SEN schools throughout the findings sections to help anonymise the participants. The table below illustrates the age and gender of the children and young people who took part in this research.

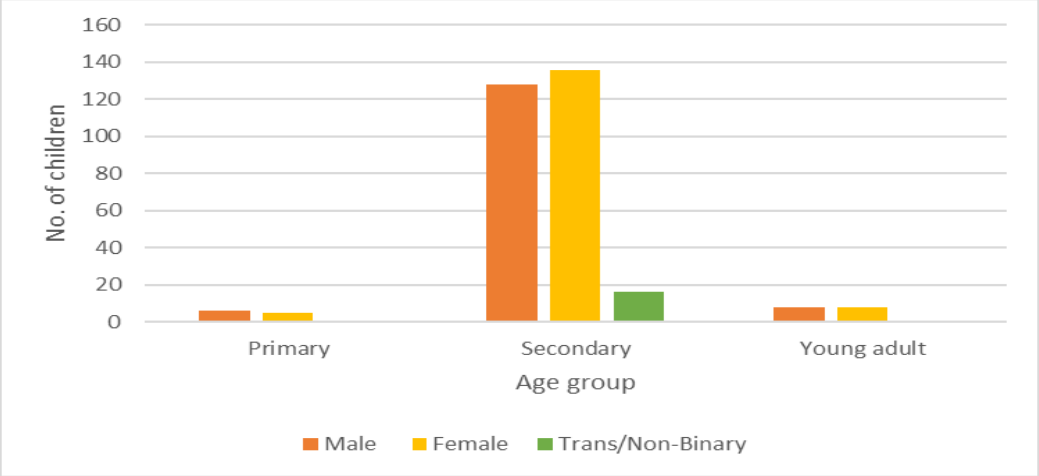

Figure 1: Children and young people sample broken down by age and gender.

Parents/carers: Thirteen adult parents/carers took part in the research. Of these, nine were female and four were male. In terms of ethnicity, six were Black African Caribbean/Black African and seven were White. The parents (n=7) with children in our four key schools, as noted above, were all Essex based and the social media recruited parents (n=6) were based across England and Wales.

Educators: Thirty-eight educators took part in the research, representing a range of ages, genders and ethnicities. All of the staff who took part were based in the four Essex schools.

Dark web analysis of forums to address RQ 1(b)
With the aim of gaining insight into SG-CSAM from a perpetrator perspective, an analysis of dark web CSAM forums was undertaken, using the open-source intelligence provider WEB-IQ Voyager system. In order to identify posts and discussion pertaining specifically to SG-CSAM, a list of relevant search terms was developed in collaboration with IWF analysts. This list contained 136 key words and 28 key phrases (Appendix A) which are frequently used in perpetrator discussions of SG-CSAM. These key words were used to develop search strings, which were utilised to identify content relating to SG-CSAM. We also conducted searches for handbooks or guides specifically focused on SG-CSAM. Historical searches took place back to January 2020 up to and including 19th September 2023.

Similar to other research which has used dark web forum scraping (Van der Bruggen and Blokland, 2022), we found that posts were too detailed for meaningful analysis; as such, threads (the layer of a forum characterised by different topics, where posts are contained) were analysed instead. Relevant material was extracted and placed in a file for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis
The data from each component of the research was thematically analysed and the findings integrated to arrive at a number of recommendations for future campaign direction and design.

Study strengths and limitations

While the research has a number of strengths, it's important to recognise its potential limitations. Firstly, the majority of this research was conducted across Essex, so the findings may not be generalisable to the rest of the U.K. Secondly, there was limited engagement from primary-aged children. Thirdly, there was a reluctance and/or nervousness by some schools to take part, which limited the numbers of educators and parents involved in the research.

Findings

This section sheds light on the complexities which drive decision making around engagement in sharing intimate images, and highlights children and young people's perception of, and responses to, current messaging received in relation to SG-CSAM, and their ideas for more effective education and prevention both in the short and longer term. The findings are presented as key themes: the socio-cultural context that children exist within and experience; SG-CSAM and gender; risk factors; parents and educators' responses; perpetrator communication insights; and perpetrator tradecraft[4].

The online context children exist within and experience.

Research suggests that children and young people do not tend to differentiate between their online and offline lives (Karlsson and Josephson, 2021). Access to the internet has become a ubiquitous aspect of identity formation, making friends and feeling connected, and sexual exploration (Quayle, 2020).

> *"We don't really go out now and that's how we kind of meet* [online] *and get to know people."* (Year 12/13 female, Independent Boarding School).

> *"All our work is done online and lots of us have things like Snapchat and online gaming chat groups and it's easy for someone to pretend to be like you when you can't actually see who it is."* (Listening Session participant).

Several sub-themes emerged from discussions with children and young people regarding their perceptions of the online context within which SG-CSAM occurs, which ultimately shapes their views, perceptions and understanding. The sub-themes below not only provide insight into how children and young people understand, interact with and use the internet and social media, but they also shed light on some social norms that have developed in 'online life', that often differ from social norms attached to 'offline life'.

Making friends and talking to strangers

The children and young people in this research demonstrated that the internet and social media permeate every aspect of their lives. Friendships and relationships

[4] Tradecraft refers to the tactics, skills and techniques used by perpetrators when contacting, grooming and extorting children and young people. This tradecraft is learned from experience and often shared with other perpetrators.

are instigated, nurtured and developed online, and talking to strangers is an essential and normalised part of that process. This is a contrast to dominant child protection 'stranger danger' messaging of the 1980s, perpetuated in national safety campaigns (Horney, 2008), which many current parents have grown up hearing. These messages appear to be good advice when they are considered in the context of previous generations; however, children and young people today meet new people, make friends, and socialise online so advising them not to talk to strangers online is, for children and young people, on a par with advising them not to make friends.

Two Year 7 students (aged 11/12 years) discussed their social media use and identified the 'apps' they use on a regular basis. Research highlights that children are now more often using multiple screens at once to enjoy apps such as TikTok (Ofcom, 2022). Children and young people regularly receive friend requests from people unknown to them. However, they do recognise they have a choice in accepting these requests or not:

> *"So many people add me on Snapchat. You can tell by their names though if they're like rebels and that, so I just don't accept them."* (Year 7 male student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *" ... On TikTok, like some person, they try it, they started like texting me random stuff, and I didn't know them*." (Year 7 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

The two 'apps' referenced in the above comments by 11/12 year olds, both have a minimum age rating of 13 years, highlighting the accessibility of 'apps' meant for older children.

Engaging with people who are unknown to them means children and young people have opportunities to grow their social circle, talk to new and interesting people and maybe meet "*someone cool from another school*" (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School). It seems that for many children and young people today, the idea of an online stranger does not equate to a sense of 'danger'. One participant commented that they would "*potentially still meet them* [an online stranger] *because I am 17, so it's ok"* (Listening Session participant). In this case, the young person may feel like the risks are reduced by their age. One student, a keen gamer, commented:

> "*If there are like people that aren't toxic on the game, then a friendship could really grow. But the chances of there being an actual friendly player in the lobbies*[5] *is point 00001%"* (Year 8 male student, SEN Specialist School).

This illustrates how some children recognise the potential 'toxicity' that may exist online, but they also recognise and value even the smallest possibility of meeting a potential friend, highlighting the importance of friendships and connections to

[5] A lobby is a space where gamers can meet up before or after playing the game.

children and young people. This suggests that some young people are willing to take the risk of meeting strangers in real life, if it could mean meeting someone who could be a new friend or partner. One parent/carer participant, who also supported neuro-diverse children as a profession, recognised how for some children and young people the need for friendship could potentially increase their vulnerability online:

> *"I think they're so vulnerable, gullible … if they think someone's their friend, then I think they try and hold on to that for as much as they, as long as they can."* (Parent and Residential Support Worker, SEN Specialist School).

These comments highlight the importance of the internet and social media in friendship-forming which acts as a motivating factor for many children and young people. This, coupled with the normalisation of talking to strangers online, serves to increase the vulnerability of many children and young people who may not be able to differentiate between positive and potentially abusive relationships. However, some respondents demonstrated their understanding of some of the potential risks attached to talking with strangers online:

> *"'You think you're talking to an eight-year-old guy, so, it is probably a 50-year-old, long beard, Santa Claus style paedophile, that wants to R word* [rape] *the living heck out of you.'* (Year 8 male student, SEN Specialist School)

This comment also highlights the common (mis)conception that people who perpetrate child sexual abuse are older males. This stereotype can be a risk factor to children and young people online because it may prevent their recognition that their peers are also likely to request and non-consensually share images and videos (Ibrahim, 2022; Karlsson and Josephson, 2021).

Using the Internet for sex 'education'[6]

The children and young people involved in this research overwhelmingly wanted educators to deliver input around sex education, but many respondents considered the input received in school as inadequate or inappropriate, although there was some acknowledgement that attempts were at least being made to inform them.

> *"I just don't think we're getting taught some really important things because I'm Catholic, but you might need to know, like, sex education doesn't get taught. I learned more about it in primary school. We don't even get talked to about issues and condoms and things."* (Year 10 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *'We watched this video, and the people like, act it out and that, so it's not really like a real-life sort of situation, more like acting.'* (Year 10 male student, Catholic Secondary School).

[6] The word 'education' is in inverted commas in recognition of the often dubious, harmful content of sexual material and pornography that children and young people can be exposed to online.

As a result children and young people have utilised the internet to circumvent or supplement school-based sex and relationship education, in order to learn about sex and explore their own sexuality, often without any guidance or supervision, Research (Children's Commissioner, 2023a) suggests that children and young people are increasingly utilising pornography for this education, which has led to a culture of misinformation and misrepresentation around sexual intercourse and safe and respectful relationships.

Although a very small number of children and young people discussed speaking to parents about sex, for the majority of children and young people, the idea of talking to their parents was very uncomfortable. Interestingly, the discomfort seemed to stem from the fact that parents did not tend to speak to their children about anything relating to sexual relationships. This was particularly evident from discussions with children and young people at a Catholic secondary school, who explained:

> " *… because we've never spoken about it* [sex] *and … it would be very new, and it could cause less stress* [discussing it] *away from parents."* (Year 10 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

The normalisation of sharing 'nudes'

> *"Sharing images happens so much at school, more* [needs] *to be done about it."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

As previously discussed, the internet provides children and young people with opportunities to explore and express their own sexuality, and there is a clear disconnect between their understanding of 'nudes' and their understanding of these as harmful content, or SG-CSAM, coupled with a gradual normalisation of sharing sexual images (Ringrose et al., 2012; WeProtect, 2023b). Understanding the extent to which sexualised communication has become normalised for children and young people today, is essential in understanding the context within which the rise in SG-CSAM has taken place. The sexualised and remote context within which young people now communicate, has encouraged the exchanging of intimate and sexualised images.

Children and young people's responses were divided between those who felt they were 'too sensible' to share intimate images, often younger children, and those for whom sharing was a normal part of life, even though they themselves may not engage in it. Younger children were more dismissive of this as an issue, which could be due to the fact that requesting nudes and sharing was not reported by participants as something which affected young people until the age of 13 to 14 years. One participant explains why this is the case:

> *"Yeah, that's* [Year 9] *when it* [sharing nudes] *becomes kind of a thing … I think they become like, more involved with that relationship. Beforehand, it's more, not so serious relationships, I'd say. I think Year nine is when you start to really, like, be able to have a proper thing with someone. And then*

> *you might think that you're at that stage* [where you share nudes]." (Year 12/13 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

Older participants (Year 9 plus) overwhelmingly felt that requesting and sharing of images had become a regular and normalised aspect of daily life, along with unsolicited 'dick pics' which many of the older girls discussed receiving on a very regular basis from Year 9 onwards. A Year 7 child (Catholic Secondary School) said "*it happens to me a lot*"; another Year 7 child described it happening to them *"24/7"* (Catholic Secondary School), and another explained that it was occurring *"multiple times a month by boys and men" (*Listening Session participant, details unknown*).*

Some educators also highlighted their awareness of the normalisation of sharing 'nudes', and being targeted for nude pictures was discussed as being routine for some of their children and students. One teacher discussed how *"most girls had received unsolicited naked pictures, 'dick pics' from boys and it was entirely normal"* (Teacher, Catholic Secondary School). It is important to clarify that he explained that for female students it had become normalised, rather than the fact that it was perceived by the staff as normal. A Youth Worker commented that "*our young people said that it was ''just one of those things that happens now"* (Youth Worker, Listening Session), a finding supported by wider research (Revealing Reality, 2022).

It is likely that online sexual imagery and the sharing of it has become normalised over a long period of time. For instance, research from over a decade ago (Ringrose et al., 2012) highlighted the amount of online sexual imagery and communication that children were exposed to and had to navigate. More recent research (IWF, 2022) has clearly demonstrated the exponential rise in these images, and the participants in this research have all grown up with this type of content. However, despite this normalisation, many children also told us that that they would not be prepared to share sexual images of themselves. During the Listening Sessions across the range of youth groups, comments included:

> "*It is never right to ask for a nude photo, even if they are your girlfriend/ boyfriend and you want to have sex with them when you are older."*
>
> *"If you send nudes, you are dirty."*
>
> *"It's dangerous to send nudes as you can't trust everyone."*

The comments above illustrate that children and young people have a variety of views and understanding about sharing 'nudes', but underpinning all the comments is a general acceptance that it is a 'normal', or expected, part of life.

The emergence of a collecting culture

Some girls in this research overwhelmingly felt that it is the behaviour of boys who unethically[7] share 'nudes', either through vengeance or as part of an emerging 'football card culture', which informed their decision-making around sharing nudes. Some teaching staff also highlighted how the issue of SG-CSAM amongst

[7] This refers to sharing without the consent of the person in the image or video, and derives from the term 'ethical sharing' which is used to refer to images that are shared with consent.

their male students has become a collecting culture, with some of their boys treating the assemblage of these indecent images like collecting Pokémon cards:

> *"I know of cases where boys are sharing pictures like football cards."* (Teacher, Independent School).

This commodification of imagery by boys has also been recognised in other research (Revealing Reality, 2022; WeProtect, 2023b; Ringrose et al., 2012), and this *'collecting culture' was* also discussed in another school, but the teacher highlighted that although it was mainly boys who were doing this, it was not only boys:

> *"I also became aware that that there was a 'collecting culture' going on … with some boys requesting pictures of girls and collecting pictures, and I also came across an instance of a girl also collecting pictures."* (Teacher, Catholic Secondary School).

Children and young people's direct experience of SG-CSAM

Few children and young people who participated in this research had direct experience of SG-CSAM[8], however many knew someone (a friend, relative or someone in their school) that this had happened to. The following examples were discussed in the Listening Sessions delivered in the youth groups:

> "*A guy in my year made a video of him doing things to himself and it got spread round the school."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).
>
> *"A boy in my school had a picture of his penis shared on social media and he left the school."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).
>
> *"I saw a video of a girl assaulted. It was shared with many at school."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).
>
> *"My friend has been done for revenge porn at school."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

These comments highlight that wherever these images and videos are taken, which is likely to be within a private space such as the home environment, the impact occurs within the school environment, which is discussed in more detail below.

Only a few of the participants talked about their direct experience of SG-CSAM, and the following comments illustrate the forms it can take and how quickly and easily something that is perceived as innocuous and safe can become harmful:

[8] For example, having had an image shared non-consensually or having been victimised by a perpetrator online,

> *'It happened to me when I was like, nine and I was playing Roblox with my little cousin … this random person, they sent me a friend request and like, because I thought there [sic] was trying to be nice, I accepted it, and they started asking me to send nudes and stuff.'* (Year 7 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *"I was chatting to someone who was using a voice changer to sound younger."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

> *"A friend from school asked me to take my clothes off on video and he threatened to kill me. I told a teacher, and he was removed from the college."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

> "*I was contacted through social media and Snapchat by another student and asked to send photos, but I stopped talking to them straight away."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

This range of experiences, experienced both directly and indirectly, exposes the issue of sexualised images of children being shared online by their peers and potential sexual abusers. It also highlights how children are being targeted via online social media platforms and gaming sites, all of which are used by children during their leisure time, very often in spaces considered safe, such as their own homes and bedrooms.

SG-CSAM and Gender

Gender, in relation to stereotypes, norms, expectations and inequality, is an important component of the online context, and it is a thread that is woven throughout much of the data. Other research has also highlighted the importance and influence of gender in relation to children and young people's understanding, behaviours and expression of sex and sexuality (National Education Union and UK Feminista, 2017). Gender is a powerful aspect of socialisation processes (Bates, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2010) both 'online' and 'offline', and has shaped many of the participants' experiences, perceptions and responses regarding SG-CSAM. Gender, as a pervasive theme, will be explored here in depth and referred to in other sections.

The gendered nature of sharing images and responses to it

There were distinct gendered differences between the experiences and views shared by boys and girls regarding sharing 'nudes' and online sexual expression or behaviour, which reflect wider societal gender stereotypes. Girls particularly were often subjected to a sexist double standard whereby they often felt (implicitly and explicitly) pressure to share images of themselves, but when they did they were more harshly judged, blamed and shamed, by other boys and girls, than when boys shared images of themselves. This has been found to exist as an issue in countries such as Thailand and Ireland (WeProtect, 2023b). Whilst requesting and sharing 'nudes' was recognised as a normalised part of relationships and sexual expression, the threat of boys sharing with friends or amongst a wider peer group, was a risk which girls had to weigh up against the desire to fulfil 'expectations' and sexually progress that relationship.

However, some older female participants discussed how there did not even have to be images - that just a rumour of these images existing was as bad for them reputationally as the actual evidence. One young woman succinctly explained that "*seeing a nude and hearing about a nude is kind of the same thing*." (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School). This was discussed passionately by older girls who explained the gendered nature of image sharing and the response it receives:

> *" … say if like a boy's photo were to be leaked, I don't think that it would be as big of a deal, but if a girl was, then they've got all of these names to call people, and obviously it's not fair."* (Year 12/13 female, Independent School).

Some girls explained that boys are more likely to ask for 'nudes', and some girls will share - some because they want to and others because they feel pressurised. Discussions on this issue identified 'expectations' of girls to share 'nudes' and many Listening Session respondents wanted it noted that manipulation and pressure were important drivers in decision making.

> *"I was talking to my boyfriend, and he wanted me to send rude pictures. I was really scared to tell, but I told my sister, and she told me to block him and never unblock him."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

This finding is similar to other research, which surveyed 5,000 children and young people and found that girls reported that they were more often asked for images and also sent more images, than boys (Revealing Reality, 2022). A Pastoral Lead in a school also highlighted that victim blaming occurs, which places the responsibility on girls for sharing their images, and blames them for the consequences when they did. Often girls who had shared their images are bullied as a result, indicating harsh judgement from peers:

> *"Even the boys sharing, you know, their chest or thighs and that's all normalised but then when, and this is normally the girls, share something very explicit - amongst all of their peers - that's not normal. And then what happens is, she then just becomes targeted, she's a 'slag', 'slut.'"* (Pastoral Lead, Independent School).

Ringrose et al.'s (2012) research, over a decade ago, illustrated how derogatory terms were employed in relation to girls displaying sexual freedom, as evidenced by the above quote, but not applied to boys, and appears to be just as relevant today (e.g. WeProtect, 2023b). Another female pupil highlighted a further aspect of these double standards, touched on in the previous quote, of how female bodies are much more highly sexualised than male bodies, explaining that "*girls have more to, like, show and boys don't. So I think when boys do it, it's not seen as, as big a deal*." (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

This disparity in gendered norms about sexual behaviour and responses to it, was felt by some participants to be reflective of two things: firstly, the nature of male

anatomy which provides the option for boys to send sexualised pictures without including their genitals (e.g., torso), or if genitals are included, the picture will not usually capture the sender's face, thus making identification much more difficult. Second, the 'double standards' which women and girls are subject to in relation to sexual expression. This was eloquently summarised by a Year 12/13 (17-18 years) female student at an Independent School:

> *"It's always been like that; boys have always had more social freedom."*

Ringrose and Harvey's (2015:214) research explored the "clear gendered hierarchies around bodily display and sexual shame." These issues were also raised in recent research which examined SG-CSAM in three contexts, Ghana, Ireland and Thailand. Shame was discussed across all three research sites in relation to girls as being more: vulnerable to negative experiences; likely to be victims of coercion and judged more severely for sharing images; motivated by desire for approval and acceptance, and fear of losing their boyfriends (WeProtect, 2023b). Shame, in relation to being shamed and feeling ashamed, is highly gendered in this space and has been recognised in other research (Revealing Reality, 2022), which highlights the shame which would be experienced by girls for sharing their 'nudes', as opposed to the increase in social status bestowed on the boys for gaining the images.

However, older female participants (aged 16-18 years) were keen to communicate that girls also ask for nudes, and that some girls share them without being asked. It was also clear that responses by girls towards other girls who have engaged in sharing their images, can also be shaming, which creates further challenges for girls and young women to negotiate. Whilst they recognised that this issue was predominantly driven by boys, they also felt that discussions should not stereotype girls as passive and powerless:

> *"The boys can 'not ask', and the girls can 'not send'. They've both got power."* (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

The biggest fear for the majority of children and young people in this research was related to the 'leaking' of 'nudes', and the subsequent blaming and shaming response. The comment below capture the impact of this:

> *" … I felt emotional, and bullied, embarrassed, mortified, sick, guilty, sad, and regretful; people called me a 'slag' and a 'skit.'"* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

Forty-three per cent of Listening Session participants identified that their top concern was the shame and humiliation of an image being shared with others. This is in contrast to what most adults fear, which underpins the majority of safeguarding initiatives and policies in this space: that a child or young person will be sexually abused and exploited by an online perpetrator.

Risk factors

It is clear that what adults (parents and professionals) identify as risks in relation to SG-CSAM is different to what children and young people identify as risk. This is simply illustrated in the terminology used: professionals refer to this as child sexual abuse materials whereas children and young people talk about sharing 'nudes'; and adults' fears relate to the reducing the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation whereas children and young people are more concerned with what their peers will think. The ease of access to and the scope of harmful online content tends to alarm most adults, whereas children and young people are curious and often feel pressured to explore it. This section provides an overview of the key risk factors drawn from the data most relevant to developing a prevention campaign.

Ubiquity of pornography

Both educators and children described how children, especially boys, are viewing often extreme pornography online, and a finding of this research is that children and young people are using pornography to fill a gap in their knowledge and satisfy their curiosity. This is supported by research which found that almost 80% of their teenage participants had seen violent pornography before the age of 18 (Children's Commissioner, 2023a:5). The young people reported that they had often accidentally happened upon the material on mainstream social media sites, such as Snapchat, Instagram and X, something also echoed in other research (Children's Commissioner, 2023b). One staff member at a school illustrated this point:

> *"Most boys are learning about sex on their phone now and that's what they think sex is. We're not talking about the top shelf magazine, with topless women. They can easily be looking at some seriously worrying stuff, as you know and that's what they think sex is'"* (Pastoral Lead, Independent School).

Adult participants expressed their concerns about the impact the normalisation and prevalence of viewing pornography can have on boys' development, on their perception and treatment of girls, and what a sexual relationship should be like. Research has identified some of these impacts on their expectations of sex, their body image, attitudes towards women and girls and harmful sexual behaviour and intimate partner violence (Children's Commissioner, 2023b). One teacher explored this point:

> *"My worry about young manhood is that it's now warped. The arms race for exotic pornography amongst young children."* (Teacher, Catholic Secondary School).

One teacher described how he is seeing how this is affecting the relationships between teenage boys and girls within his school, and how many girls no longer want to be around the boys, due to how they are being treated by them. The same teacher later discussed one boy whose behaviour was of real concern to them, but the feeling was of being unclear on how to address it in school:

> *"I'm terrified about what he is seeing, and his behaviour, and his acting it out and … what can we do? We're overwhelmed."* (Teacher, Catholic Secondary School).

Furthermore, one parent described how her son had managed to access hardcore pornography online from a very young age. The extreme nature of this pornography had worrying consequences with regards to his behaviour. The mother explained how:

> *"…*[from] *the age of 9 or 10 is when he started going on there watching porn and then he managed to get on to Japanese manga porn which was quite recently, uh, watching animal porn, which is obviously illegal."* (Parent of SEN child).

The Children's Commissioner (2023b) reported that the average age which children are first viewing pornography in England is now 13 years. However, more than a quarter of the 1,000 teenagers surveyed had viewed pornography by age 11 and they found links that the viewing at such a young age correlated with low self-esteem. Moreover, they reported that children also felt an "unbearable pressure to view hardcore pornography even if they do not want to" (Ibid: n.p) and that this could in turn influence children exhibiting harmful sexual behaviour. Recent research also suggests that viewing pornography may form a pathway to perpetrating child sexual abuse (We Protect, 2023b).

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)

One parent described how her son, who has since been diagnosed with Autism and other special educational needs, had managed to access pornographic materials on devices from a young age, despite her best efforts to implement parental controls. The impacts of this included a range of harmful behaviour such as displaying sexually explicit behaviour in public and acting out, what his mother felt, were actions he had witnessed from watching pornography online:

> *"'The things that he's been looking at, and then he'll start doing things to me like lying on me and putting the pillow over my head and doing stuff like that, which I can only think is stuff that he's learnt on* [sic] *porn."* (Parent of SEN child).

This finding has been supported by other research (Children's Commissioner, 2023b) and the *Everyone's Invited* website lists testimonials from pupils at hundreds of schools who have been subjected to sexual violence, predominantly from boys. With regards to concerning and harmful sexual behaviour, it was evident that parents/carers and educators did not know where to go for advice. Whilst discussing the help and advice available from support organisations, there was a sense that they were not knowledgeable or preventative enough about the topic and therefore were not able to adequately support the parents:

> *"I tried them* [a national children's charity], and *they said he was too young and then I was like, 'well I'll just come back to you in a few years' time, 'cause he'll be doing something by then and then he'll be 10'… it was*

> *all out of control … How can they help me, and they are the proper people'"* (Parent of SEN child).

However, the same parent did acknowledge that she had found some support offered by third sector agencies that had subsequently helped her and her son.

The need to address HSB from a young age is clearly important. Smith et al. (2014) discuss the concern of an under- or over-reaction to HSB but also recognise that children can grow into the behaviour, if not addressed correctly. With the increased use of the internet from a younger age, it is likely we will see more children requiring specialist input from agencies and professionals with expertise in this area.

Parents lack of knowledge and understanding of the online world

It was clear in the findings that there is a disparity between how children and young people understand, use and view the online world, and how their parents/carers do. This was reflected in some of the parent/carer responses. One parent, who also worked in a residential children's home with neuro-divergent children, explained how she just did not understand the technology the children used and commented that:

> *"I really haven't got a clue. I have to get the younger members of staff here who've got more of an idea of what's going on than myself, to check all their tech, go through everything, see what they've been doing. And because I'm just useless, like a dinosaur." (Parent and residential home support worker).*

This quote illustrates a feeling of disempowerment or 'uselessness' for parents/carers as a result of a lack of technical knowledge, which may serve to increase their concerns about what their children and young people may be exposed to online, and perhaps trigger angry and punishing responses. For example, Ofcom (2023) reported that around two thirds of parents were concerned that their child might view inappropriate or sexually explicit content whilst online.

Of the parents involved in the research, most reported not having conversations with their children about the dangers and risks of online sexual abuse and exploitation, and there were also mixed views among the parents/carers about when to discuss these sorts of issues with their own children. As children may not always feel able to discuss these issues with their parents, the internet is being used to learn about sex and sexuality and pornography which, in the absence of open discussions with appropriate adults, is filling this gap, something which many parents are unaware of and unprepared for.

However, there was some evidence of positive parental/carer education, where families would discuss these issues with their child, for example *"my parents taught me about perverts a long time ago"* (Year 8 male student, SEN Specialist School), and a small number of children and young people predicted much more positive

reactions from their parents/carers should they become a victim of SG-CSAM. They were able to describe the response they would like to receive. For example, 49% of the Listening Session participants identified that they would want to be taken seriously, believed, and have their trusted adult be kind and understanding, rather than have them shout, blame, lecture and punish them.

Circumventing parental controls

Parents explained that their children were often very knowledgeable regarding technology, to a much greater extent than they were. The findings indicate that children were often able to circumvent the parental controls. An example of this was highlighted by a parent who explained how her son had managed to access inappropriate websites, despite her doing what she could to have a good overview of her son's online activities:

> *"I have the family link* [Google parental controls app]*. His Xbox is connected to my phone, so I can read their messages, who he's adding, who he's playing with and whereabouts he is and everything. Unfortunately, he's bypassed all that and he's managed to get onto things."* (Parent of SEN child).

Another parent explained how she had found her neuro-divergent daughter, at the age of 4 or 5, had managed to circumvent parental controls by turning off the time limit on her iPad, highlighting the skills, and desire, of children and young people to maintain their access to their online world. As yet, it is unclear what the impacts of the new Online Safety Act will be, but it is apparent that more needs to be done to safeguard children online and support parents/carers to be more effective at protecting their own children from online harms.

These findings suggest that there is a need to help parents/carers to: really understand the scope, and often extreme nature, of harmful online content; how easily this content can be accessed by children, including very young ones; how easily their children can be accessed by perpetrators; be better informed, supported and equipped to have difficult conversations in a supportive and appropriate manner; and to develop technical and digital knowledge. Parents/carers are a crucial part of safeguarding and empowering their children online as they are often the frontline of protection for children and young people.

Childrens and parents/carers' reluctance to talk about sex to each other.

Woven through much of the data is a sense of embarrassment and shame that broadly relates to sex, and this was reflected in children and young people's reluctance to talk to their parents/carers about these topics. Parents in our study discussed these conversations as being 'tricky', 'difficult', and that often young people see this as an invasion of their privacy. Although a very small number discussed speaking to parents about this, for the majority of children and young people the idea of talking to their parents was very uncomfortable. The discomfort seemed to stem from the fact that parents did not tend to speak to their children about anything within this area (e.g. sexual relationships etc). This was particularly evident from discussions with children and young people at a Catholic secondary school, who explained:

> *"My mum doesn't really talk about it, but she's like, 'I've done ungodly things', it's so wrong."* (Year 7 male student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *"Also because if we've never really spoken to our parents about this … it would be very new, and it could cause less stress away from parents* [discussing it at school] *because it depends what the certain parent's opinion is on it."* (Year 7 female student, Catholic Secondary School).

One parent admitted that she had just "*never thought about talking to her* [daughter] *about it."* (Parent, Catholic Secondary School).

Self-esteem

The desire for approval and acceptance can be indicative of low self-esteem, and while this is not exclusive to girls and young women, existing research has highlighted the links between low self-esteem and being at risk of being groomed online (Pasca et al., 2022). Our research illustrated that the lack of self-esteem is an issue which can cause increased vulnerability to being targeted online for indecent images. One of our focus groups of children and another of educators discussed why this might be the case.

> *"I think because someone is asking for their nudes, they just like the attention. They're like 'woah someone like thinks I'm attractive, oh, yay' and they don't see it in the right way."* (Year 7 male student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *"When social media works by continuously undermining your self-esteem, then you're 'pissing in the wind', aren't you?"* (Teacher, Catholic Secondary School).

Other research confirmed that "above average internet use increases vulnerability when interacting with other characteristics, such as having a disability or low self-esteem" (Katz and El Asam, 2020:47). Our findings suggest that the need for validation or recognition and approval could be one reason why children share their images.

The issue of why children might distribute or send SG-CSAM is diverse, and not only related to peer-pressure and low-self-esteem. One teacher suggested that children and young people:

> *" … see it as a bit of fun. Passing on images because it's been requested … they don't understand the consequences of it going out and gone forever*." (Teacher, SEN Specialist School).

However, Revealing Reality's research (2022:6) suggested that "while in some cases nude image-sharing may be empowering or part of flirting, in many cases it can turn into or mask experiences or outcomes that are not just harmless fun", which raises the issue of something which can start out feeling like fun becoming much more serious for the children involved.

Parent and educators' responses

Parent/carer responses

A key finding from the research was that engaging with parents/carers on these issues was extremely challenging for the schools and the research team. Overall, there was a lack of engagement from parents, despite offering a voucher as recompense for their time. As such, there were markedly fewer parents engaged with this research project than children or educators. For example, only three parents attended one of the online evening focus groups and were visibly surprised to be in such a small group. It is impossible to draw conclusions on the low levels of parental attendance, which could reflect a lack of interest in the topic, or relate to the fact that the topic is sensitive or viewed as difficult, and may possibly include the view that these issues will not impact their own children. As a result, we have incorporated the parent/carer responses we have throughout other sections of the report to ensure their voices have been appropriately included. In lieu of a lack of in-depth responses from parents/carers, we have included below children and young people's perceptions of how they believe their parents would react to SG-CSAM.

Some research supports our finding regarding a reluctance to engage in discussions about these issues. In international research, WeProtect (2023d) found that for many parents the biggest barrier in supporting their children, when they experience an online sexual harm, is that their children do not acknowledge the experience as harmful, and the children were frightened of their parents' reactions to any disclosures. Half of the 1,000 parents surveyed did not feel that social media and gaming companies were doing enough to keep their children safe online, and consequently, close to two-thirds of them felt that they were responsible for keeping their children safe online. *"This feeling of responsibility is being driven by the belief that many stakeholders are not doing enough to keep children safe online"* (Ibid: 8) which highlights the need for companies to do more to protect children and young people using their apps from online abuse.

Childrens and young people's perceptions of parent/carer responses

The majority of children and young people predicted negative responses from parents and carers should they report victimisation in relation to SG-CSAM. There was a widespread perception that having shared 'nudes' or engaged in sexually explicit conversations and behaviours, whether with peers or with people previously unknown to them online, parental responses would be predominantly ones of disappointment and anger rather than support:

> "*They* [parents] *would also be disappointed as they think that this is just something we should know not to do. They don't understand but maybe if they had been able to do it when they were teenagers, they would like to understand more.*" (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

Many respondents viewed their parents as 'out of touch' and lacking understanding of the nature of their online social interactions, which led to children expect disproportionate or angry responses, for example:

> *"I would not tell my parents as I would fear them over-reacting." (Listening Session participant, details unknown).*

> *"'My parents would take my phone away or make me delete my socials, so I wouldn't tell them." (Listening Session participant, details unknown).*

In Listening Sessions, 43% of the children and young people stated they would not report any concerns or involvement in SG-CSAM to parents, and of these, 23% specifically mentioned not telling their mum. For children and young people, the fear of parental 'over-reaction' and punishment were key drivers behind decisions not to disclose:

> *"I would tell my mum and dad … what happened and then I'd slam dunk the phone into the bin. My parents will probably go, 'first of all, thank you for telling us, and second of all, tech ban!'"* (Year 8 male student, SEN School).

As previously discussed, parents often feel unequipped to effectively prevent their child experiencing online harm, and even when they do what they can, children are still able to circumvent parental controls and access harmful content and people.

School/education responses

The majority of children and young people in this research had experienced some form of educational input around the issue of SG-CSAM and this was most commonly via Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and Sexual Relationship Education (SRE) lessons. Some, although less commonly, had received 'expert' input by way of talks in assemblies by external speakers and charities. The participants identified several issues regarding the quality and appropriateness of SRE. The input received from these various providers was reportedly consistent in their abstinence-based messaging telling children and young people not to share intimate photos/videos, and to not talk to people you do not know online. Whilst these messages were clear and children and young people were able to recall them, discussions within the research highlights the shortfalls of such messaging and their gendered undertone.

Sex and relationship education (SRE)

Most children and young people overwhelmingly wanted sessions delivered at school, with some preferring delivery by external experts, which is consistent with existing literature (Gaffney et al., 2019; DeGue et al., 2014). and some children and young people reported being more likely to disclose to a teacher or someone at school than a parent. This could suggest that educators may be able to play a larger role in encouraging children to discuss this issue and disclose if necessary. However, the youth workers leading the Listening Sessions also reported that many of the participants felt that SRE lessons were undermined by the behaviour of some of their fellow students in the classroom:

> *"No one really takes it seriously when the teachers talk about it, and that they just laugh when teachers have to say the word 'willy' or 'penis."* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

> *"I also feel like more could be done, but there are also some people just don't listen. And they just mess around."* (Year 10 student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *"Our group had a discussion about how everyone finds it funny when teachers try to deliver sessions on this"* (Listening Session participant, details unknown).

It is not clear whether these behaviours are symptomatic of feelings of embarrassment, generic behavioural challenges which the educators have to deal with on a daily basis, or a lack of specialist teacher training to deliver this content.

Overall, the SRE input received in school was not considered adequate or appropriate in its approach by the children and young people in this research, but there was some acknowledgement that attempts were at least being made to inform them. Youth workers leading the Listening Sessions reported that "*our under 11's had not been educated on this* [SRE]*, just general online safety*" (Listening Session Youth Worker), and some children identified that their SRE lessons were inadequate, particularly in their faith school:

> *"Sex education doesn't get taught. I learned more about it in primary school. We don't even get talked to about issues and condoms and things."* (Year 10, female student, Catholic Secondary School).

> *"We watched this video, and the people like, act it out and that, so it's not really like a real life sort of situation, more like acting."* (Year 10, male student, Catholic Secondary School).

One child shared how she had looked something up on the school computer associated with this topic and had received a form of detention for it. This could be viewed as a missed opportunity by the school to explore what the child was looking up and to potentially assist with the further education of that child, rather than penalise her for her own research. However, it is clearly difficult for schools to manage the education of pornography and SRE without specialist training and support.

Dominant prevention messages that have often been transmitted to children and young people have been based on abstinence, such as 'do not share intimate photos/videos', and 'do not talk to people you do not know online' (Setty, 2019; Gavey et al., 2024; WeProtect, 2023b). The literature review[9] we completed prior to beginning this research highlighted that abstinence messaging has predominantly focused on those who are most likely to be victims of SG-CSAM, namely teenage girls. Some girls in this research felt targeted by prevention efforts, and highlighted the gendered undertone of these messages, which

[9] PIER 'Literature Review: What approaches to prevention campaigns are effective in reducing the production and distribution of 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material?'

reinforced wider societal norms and expectations regarding boys' and girls' behaviours and responsibilities. They reflected that girls were targeted in prevention and behaviour change messages because of their perceived ability to self-regulate, whereas boys were considered too immature to act on messaging. As a result, the unethical sharing of 'nudes' was not properly addressed, and girls were ultimately held responsible, something which frustrated them greatly:

> "*It's always like, 'right boys - we can't stop them from asking; so girls just don't send it'. It's never like 'boys, don't ask'. It's really one sided*." (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

> *"The talks from the school are very much like vague, like message of 'don't do it'. It doesn't actually get into like a realistic thing that would actually happen. It's just the basic stuff, but whose life and relationships are that basic?'* (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

A focus on abstinence messaging fails to acknowledge the normalisation of sharing 'nudes', therefore instructing young people not to engage in this behaviour is meaningless, and also serves to reinforce the disparity between the lives of children and young people, and their parents, carers and educators. It also eradicates any possibility for harm reduction or safe practice messaging. By instructing children and young people not to do it, any opportunity to discuss how they can better protect themselves is removed. Sharing 'nudes' more safely and where support can be found if required, are key messages in protecting children and young people from exploitation and abuse. Children also discussed wanting to receive this information in order to make informed decisions. The Listening Sessions found that information on safe sharing practices was amongst the top ten things children and young people wanted to know from campaigns.

Similar to the ineffectiveness of abstinence messaging, discussions with some children and young people also highlighted how the 'Do not talk to people you do not know online' message, and variations of this such as 'Do not add strangers to your socials', 'Block and report people you don't know', are ineffective and miss an important point regarding the way in which children and young people socialise, as previously discussed. This type of messaging serves to exacerbate the discord which exists regarding adults' understanding of children and young people's use of, and connection to, their online world. It also makes assumptions that girls, who are the predominant targets, have the power to end communication, which as the older girls in this research explained, is not always the case:

> "*It's not, you know, it's not as simple as going, 'no, you know what? I don't wanna* [sic] *talk to you anymore' … And they don't say what to do if you're in that situation. It's just 'don't do it' … You can't really avoid someone like texting you constantly. You can block them but yeah, if they're that desperate they'll find another way. Especially if they're in your year group*." (Year 12/13 female student, Independent School).

The above comment also highlights the gendered complexities which females have to navigate within this area, which are intrinsically tied up with expectation, pressure, and manipulation; something children and young people were keen to communicate.

Dark web CSAM forum findings

The following general observations regarding how perpetrators discussed matters relating to SG-CSAM were made. Please note that some content in this section is particularly explicit and potentially disturbing.

Female versus male abuse

There was a notable difference in the language used to discuss and describe females in SG-CSAM compared to males. Female victims were typically discussed in more sexualised and derogatory terms and this difference appeared to extend to the types of abuse victims were directed to engage in. Females were more often discussed in relation to the utilisation of household objects for penetration (hairbrush, toilet brush, pencil, knives) than were males.

'Self-generated' as consensual

There was an inherent sense that the children and young people in the material had consented to the abuse because of its 'self-generated' nature. It is likely that for some perpetrators, this perceived 'consent' neutralises feelings of guilt and shame.

Hierarchy and distorted morality

A hierarchical relationship between those who produced and distributed SG-CSAM, and those who merely consumed it, was evident. Those who identify the child, direct the abuse and produce images and videos for other forum members, are referred to colloquially as 'cappers'; a term which stems from the word 'cap' which means to divide a video or images into stills for further distribution (WeProtect, 2023c). Cappers often demonstrated their disquiet with the lack of thanks and recognition they received for the production of the CSAM, and there was a tendency amongst those who consumed SG-CSAM to differentiate themselves from the capper, whom they considered sexual abusers. This is suggestive of a distorted morality, which was marked within dark web forums, and further evidenced by recent attempts by forum administrators to limit 'content' derived by blackmail and IP address hacking, as well as the more severe material known as 'hurt core'. This suggests something of a dichotomy amongst dark web forum users, between those that perceive the consumption of child abuse as a 'hobby' and those for whom it is a damaging 'affliction'. This distorted morality was further evident in posts by 'cappers' who sought to advise parents (on the forums) on child safety and prevention. As one 'capper' stated:

> *"If any of you have kids by the way and want to keep them from falling for people like me, open the discussion about this. Don't make it taboo by screaming at them when you find out, let them be able to tell you about this*

and then calmly get them out of that situation, less shame and anger the better, then get them off those sites."

Tradecraft

Analysis revealed a series of steps which cappers utilised to access and groom children and young people for SG-CSAM. These steps have been categorised and are discussed below.

Step 1. Making first contact

Social media sites such as Facebook, Vine, Tiktok, X, YouTube together with apps more specifically used by children for chatting (i.e., Omegle (recently shut down), Discord, BeReal, Chat Roulette, Yubo, Snap Chat, and Kik) were often used for first contact with a potential victim or to identify content which could be capped and distributed on the forums. These sites/apps are widely promoted in dark web forums as 'good' places to contact children and find content.

Tradecraft discussions highlighted the success which perpetrators have connecting with children or finding material to cap on the open web, and this success means tradecraft has not changed significantly over the years. Making initial contact with children by attracting them to chat, something perpetrators refer to as 'baiting', is the first stage in the process and dark web forums feature tutorials and 'how to guides' produced by experienced perpetrators. Whilst many perpetrators use what is referred to as 'bait material', essentially fake accounts using pictures of young boys or girls, this is not always necessary, as one perpetrator discusses:

"It was very easy using a girl bait and almost all boys would fall for her, I tried with young boy bait and still half of them accepted to show. But then I wanted to try to cap as a man, just to see. With my surprise I found that about 1/4 of the boys were willing to show for a man, those are the best ones."

Discussions around the process of 'baiting' were focussed on identifying a shared interest with the child or young person, and advice regarding this was frequently shared within the dark web forums, as the following quotes highlight:

"I've heard from one capper that he gets a lot of hits for using 'Bluey[10]"

"Most commonly used interest or search words are the following: girls, girl, boys, boy, Minecraft, Roblox, Fortnite, sex, YouTube and so forth."

Step 2. Gaining trust and developing a rapport

Once first contact has been made with a child or young person, the next step is to gain their trust and develop a rapport. The dark web forums contained extensive discussion on how this might be achieved and experienced perpetrators were happy to share their tradecraft, as the following comments highlight:

[10] Bluey is a cartoon character dog popular in the UK with young children. For more information, see https://www.bluey.tv/

> *"Do a ton of recon* (reconnaissance) *so you don't come off as 'hello fellow young people.'".*

> *"First rule to find boys is to be friends with them, don't be weird and acting like a 'weirdo' looking for nude pics this is the rule one -the second rule is to act normal and nice."*

Dark forum discussions also highlighted that friendships can be easily formed, even when the perpetrator is not pretending to be a young person; and as such, the perpetrator can progress to the next step very quickly.

Step 3. Pre-offence exposure and sexual desensitisation
This third step is one that can be omitted by perpetrators because of the availability of children and young people who, feeling protected by the anonymity of the online environment, are willing to provide opportunities where content can be gathered, as perpetrators discuss:

> *"My experience with Omegle is that I was very surprised at how many boys and girls were willing to show their privates, often all you have to do is ask. There's a ton of cute horny curious tweens on there."*

> *"Something I learned way early on is people tend to be more open and candid online. Especially when there's a level of anonymity."*

Less common, but something analysis did identify, was the presence of children or young people on the dark web forums who wanted to be 'capped':

> *"I'm a 15-year-old boy, and it's my dream to be capped before I get too old. Does anybody have any tips on how to get capped without posting a video myself? Any feedback will be appreciated."*

For those perpetrators who were seeking to produce different content, step three seeks to desensitise children and young people to sexualised conversation, discussion and material, with the aim of normalising it. This is something perpetrators were keen to seek advice on:

> *"I myself am in my 20s, so they think of me as a friend, not really an adult. Should I wait for them to make sexual comments? Or how do I bring it up?"*

In order to engage children in producing SG-CSAM, perpetrators discussed how to normalise CSAM and desensitise children and young people to it. The following highlights the methods most used and discussed by perpetrators.

Online 'challenges'
Perpetrators discussed the use of a number of online challenges, many of which pertained to common party games or dances. These challenges encourage children to 'perform' and are used by perpetrators either to gain illicit content of

the child or young person, or to encourage a child to overcome their initial self-consciousness.

The challenges most commonly discussed were the '*make-up' challenge* (where boys are encouraged to put make-up on); '*twerking challenge*; *strip challenge, Habiba challenge'* (where boys film themselves stripping to their underwear in public, which originated when Dutch artist 'Habiba' did this in a music video); the '*mannequin challenge' (*where children and young people are instructed to hold certain poses) and the '*sock game' (*where children or young people are challenged to remove their socks without using their hands, and whilst competing physically with another individual). Whilst not all these challenges are in themselves sexual, perpetrators adapt them in order to engage children and young people in producing content which can be distributed, as the following dark web video titles highlight:

> *"'Bucket Challenge, Boy in blue boxer briefs with a Kinder Egg Tucked in His Undies."'*
>
> *"Mannequin challenge with sex positions."*

As one perpetrator discusses, these games are highly effective in eliciting content:

> *"The thing is that there is absolutely no reason for blackmailing boys to get them doing stuff on cam. There so many cams showing that even the silliest game gets them to show their stuff on cam."*

These challenges are also used by perpetrators to gauge how compliant a child or young person is, and how open they are to behaving in ways suggested to them. Existing research has also emphasised the range of dangerous online challenges and the harms which can result from them, which extend as far as physical, emotional and physiological damage, and in extreme cases, death (Hilton et al., 2021).

CSAM exposure and 'reaction shots'

Exposing children and young people to CSAM is a common method utilised by perpetrators to normalise child sexual abuse. Discussions between perpetrators focussed on what types of material is best for first exposure and included suggestions of 'cartoon CP' (child pornography), or pre-recorded abuse played via 'baitcams', discussed below.

Analysis highlighted a trend within this step for what perpetrators term 'reaction shots' or 'reaction material'. This is essentially videos or images of children and young people reacting to being shown CSAM for the first time. It seems that whilst initially exposing children and young people to CSAM was a way of normalising sexual abuse and desensitising children and young people to such behaviour, it has now become a genre of CSAM which is much sought after on dark web forums, with many running competitions for the best compilation of reaction shots.

Perpetrators also talked about using livestreaming websites to gather and cap this reaction material, something which requires an in-depth knowledge of screen rerouting, and the use of online broadcasting software (OBS) and related language programming such as JavaScript. Within dark web forums this is a common topic of discussion and technologically informed perpetrators have developed 'how to' guides, and forum users frequently ask for advice around this issue:

> *"Hey guys, is there a completely free way to be safe on Omegle? I wanna* [sic] *start to cap, show kids cp* [child pornography] *etc."*

> *"Anyone have ideas of how to show cartoon porn to kids?"*

OFCOM (2023) highlighted just how popular watching live-streaming videos is with children: 58% of all the children aged 3-17 years watched live-streamed content, and this increased to 80% for 16-17 year olds. This suggests it could be relatively easy for perpetrators to utilise live-streaming websites to capture 'reaction shots' from a range of different aged children online.

Use of 'Bait Cams'

Analysis revealed that the use of 'bait material' to make first contact and then utilise 'bait cameras' to show children and young people supposed live streams of individuals engaging in sexual acts was very common. The following comment highlights the purpose of baitcams in obtaining SG-CSAM:

> *"The capper chats to a boy via an internet video, webcam, chat session, often with the capper pretending to be a girl and sending a false video feed. The boy is persuaded to do something sexual for the 'girl' over the webcam."*

Baitcams also require technologically adept perpetrators who are able to utilise software. The following comment highlights the way in which many have honed this tradecraft:

> *"Mostly it's done using high quality "bait cams" of young girls/teens, which have been carefully crafted. Using virtual webcam software you can create loops and time-jumps to fake waving, or jump to specific parts of your video. The better cappers are so familiar with their software and bait cams that they can do these things very convincingly, without alerting the boys to the fact they're not watching a live cam."*

Once the child or young person has been coaxed into undertaking sex acts or performing in a sexual way, the initial material is obtained ready for capping and distribution.

Analysis revealed that the next goal for perpetrators is often to move communication to a different source of video conferencing such as Skype (which is operable with TOR[3]), Google hangouts or onto their own client host (operating system). This allows perpetrators to obtain specific information about the victim,

including email address, real name, and possibly home address. It also provides a route for continued communication.

Data from the Internet Watch Foundation confirms that since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a more than 1,000 per cent uprise in the number of webpages showing child sexual abuse material of children aged 7-10 which have been recorded via an internet connected device (IWF, 2023a)

Step 4. Generating further content and maintaining 'compliance'

Some victims will continue to provide SG-CSAM to perpetrators, usually because they believe they are communicating with the individual portrayed in the bait material. However, if victims refuse to continue providing material, some perpetrators will engage in a fourth step which involves securing the compliance of the victim, usually via blackmail and threats to 'leak' the original SG-CSAM.

Dark web forums have increasingly begun to ban discussions on blackmail and coercion (known as sextortion), and those wishing to discuss such matters are directed to alternative forums. Queries relating to such matters are often met with disapproving responses, which again highlights a hierarchy amongst CSAM perpetrators:

> *"Sadly there are many mates who use nasty tricks to get more and more videos! They suck! They all just piss me off!"*

> *"It's a form of manipulation by fear. I think it's one thing to show a fake girl on cam to get a kid to jerk off."*

In the absence of coverage by larger forums, smaller sites have collated historical posts on blackmail and coercion and allow discussion of these topics along with other forms of CSAM considered the lowest forms of abuse ('hurtcore'). Analysis found that these collations are often in heavily moderated areas of sites, within a specific section called BUNKER. Comments analysed within these sections shed light on the ways blackmail is utilised in order to generate the compliance of the victim and to obtain further SG-CSAM:

> *"I have her pictures and I can take one and make some changes: I will remove her clothes and add boobs and a ****, so that her parents believe* [they] *are her girl, and threaten her with her pictures, and also being able to do that to all the pictures, also the pictures are done in her house, so her parents will believe."*

Blackmail and coercion via threats to 'leak' the original material work because the victim is fearful of exposure, particularly to parents. However, the following comment highlights how coercion can be less successful if a victim is more resilient to such threats:

> *"I'm talking to the girl and threat* [sic] *her with the picture, and I will send it to your parents and everyone … she tells me 'what assures me that if I send you*

naked videos you are not going to publish them, it's better to me to let you publish this photo, better than publishing videos and I let the police find you.'"

Unfortunately, perpetrators are aware that the majority of victims will respond to threats and as such, further material is safeguarded. The following highlights the more common reactions of victims, which include bargaining with a perpetrator, and desperation:

"'She was surprisingly really obedient, and I had strange moments while I'm blackmailing her. She said, 'would you let me go if I record videos for you?'... Here are the videos 😊. I love obedient girls so much."

"[Victim name*] and* [victim name] *weep and beg* [perpetrator's name], *joined by some other weeping and psychologically tormented Loli'* [Lolita, meaning young female]."

Wolak et al. (2018) discussed the sextortion of children and found that perpetrators often pressured younger children, more often girls, for more sexual images, compared to older victims, and threats increasingly lasted more than six months. This is in addition to sexual abusers being "more likely to tell minors to harm themselves, and such respondents were more likely to feel pressured, tricked, threatened, or forced into providing images initially" (Ibid: 76). The IWF have recently reported that sextortion of children is on the rise with an increasingly large number of boys being targeted (IWF, 2023b).

A complex form of coercion which analysis highlighted, involved the hacking of a victim's IP address, which then reveals their location. This can be used as leverage to coerce the child or young person into sexual acts, and it also allows perpetrators to hack cameras by abducting the live feed of home security cameras, web cameras, or any other camera-enabled device, allowing them to watch individuals in their own home. IP SG-CSAM has become another genre of material and can involve victims who are unaware that they are being filmed. The following titles are indicative of content within this genre of SG-CSAM:

"IP Cam Autistic cute boy 'J' in diapers with boner."

"[BOYS] *Four teens in living room IP 'cam."'*

Analysis of discussions highlighted that some victims coerced in this way, are further vulnerable to being contacted by other perpetrators. The following comment highlights this:

"*The infamous* [child's name] *was capped several times by multiple cappers. Most recently, a boy named X was capped by no fewer than three different cappers ... "*
"Of my own Caps I know for a fact my usual boys [name] *and* [name] *have been capped* by [perpetrator username] *and [*perpetrator username]."

It is, however, unclear whether this vulnerability stems from the ease at which the IP address can be hacked, due to unstable Wi-Fi, or because perpetrators share the IP addresses of victims on forums.

Summary of key findings

The socio-cultural context children exist within and experience.

The internet and social media permeate every aspect of children and young people's lives and is used by them for making friends and connections, exploring their identity, learning about sex, and exploring and expressing their sexuality. New social norms and expectations have emerged online; for example, an openness to including strangers into their lives and a normalisation of sharing and collecting 'nudes'.

SG-CSAM and Gender

Gender inequality, in relation to stereotypes, norms, expectations and inequality, is an important component of the online context. Understandings about gender stereotypes in relation to online sexual behaviours and responses reflect or even exacerbate wider societal norms. For example, although all children and young people may ask for 'nudes' and share their own 'nudes', girls were much more likely to be subjected to a sexist double standard: they were under more pressure to share and were blamed and shamed if they did, by both boys and girls.

Risk factors

Pornography is easily available to children and young people, many of whom use it to fill a gap in their knowledge and satisfy their curiosity. This can have concerning and harmful impacts on children and young people's behaviour, relationships and self-esteem. There is a disparity between children and young people's understanding and use of the online world and their parents/carers. This can be exacerbated by adults' lack of understanding of the online world, children and young people's ability to circumvent parental controls, and a mutual reluctance to talk to each other about these topics.

Parent/carers' and educators' responses

Parents/carers often feel unequipped to effectively prevent their child experiencing online harm, but engaging parents/carers in this research was challenging. Children and young people largely predicted negative responses from parents/carers should they report victimisation in relation to SG-CSAM, with many saying that they would not report their concerns to parents. Children and young people overwhelmingly wanted SRE sessions delivered at school, but the current provision was largely considered inadequate by the children and young people. Dominant abstinence-messaging was considered inappropriate, irrelevant and ineffective. Children and young people want information on safe sharing practices.

Dark Web

The analysis of perpetrator tradecraft revealed four clear steps which perpetrators (cappers) who contact, groom and obtain material from children, engage in. Whilst

this type of perpetrator is very different to the peer who unethically shares 'nudes', and whilst the children and young people who participated in this research were unconcerned by child sexual abuse perpetrators, there is much information which can be extrapolated and utilised in education and prevention efforts.

Concluding comments

Our findings highlight the pervasiveness of the internet and social media in the everyday lives of children and young people, and the relevance of gender inequalities in shaping views and experiences. There is also an important and distinct generational disparity between children and young people, their parents/carers and educators. This is in relation to perceptions of the internet, emerging online norms, and associated risks and harms. Issues with the education and messages that children and young people typically receive about their online safety tended to be considered as irrelevant and ineffective by children and young people, and they expressed a preference for information on safe sharing practices.

Parents/carers and educators are at the frontline when it comes to safeguarding children and young people, but it is clear that many feel ill-equipped to do this effectively. Thus, there is a need for more support to develop not only their knowledge and understanding of children and young people's internet use, but also how to have important but sensitive conversations about sex and sexual expression, in ways which support and empower.

Appendices

Appendix A: Key word search terms

(allowed OR backup OR backups OR bating OR brush OR cap OR capped OR capper OR capping OR caps OR chubby OR collection OR congrats OR congratulations OR credit OR credits OR cum OR cumz OR cutest OR cute OR cutie OR Delilah OR ebony OR family OR fav OR fave OR favorite OR favourite OR festish OR find OR friends OR gape OR gif OR hairbrush OR hairy OR hardcore OR hole OR horney OR horny OR hot OR hottest OR hottie OR incest OR jerk OR jerking OR legend OR live-stream OR lolitas OR lollies OR mast OR masturbate OR mirror OR mirrors OR more OR naughty OR Nude OR nude OR Nudes OR nudes OR omegle OR Omegle OR others OR pale OR password OR pen OR pencil OR penetrate OR penetration OR Pics OR pics OR post OR preview OR previews OR provide OR providing OR pussey OR pussy OR reaction OR reactions OR repost OR request OR requested OR requests OR reup OR reupload OR set OR sexy OR show OR shy OR Skype OR skype OR slender OR slim OR slut OR Snapchat OR snapchat OR softcore OR stream OR streams OR strip OR stripping OR strips OR tease OR teasing OR tiktok OR Tiktok OR tik-tok OR tiktokker OR upload OR vid OR video OR Video OR vids OR wank OR wanker OR thanks OR toiletbrush OR toiletplunger OR ty OR hc OR hardcore OR jailbait OR livestream OR softcore OR camboy OR camgirl OR dickpic OR dicpic OR dickpics OR dicpics OR wish OR wow OR camboys OR camgirls OR plunger OR sc)

Appendix B: Key phrase search terms

all time fave, do you have, does anyone have, does anyone know, does anyone know who he is, does anyone know who she is, full version, good effort, good looking, good work, great content, great job, hes my favorite, I need to, I want to, I wish I could, I'd love to, looking for more, more of this, my fave, my favourite, please post, shes my favorite, the rest, the set, well done, where can I find, where can I find more

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