
Barnardo's survey on online grooming

All children can be at risk of sexual exploitation when going online and interacting with strangers, even if they have a supportive home environment.¹ In order to better understand the impact of online grooming, we carried out a snapshot survey of five Barnardo's sexual exploitation services across the UK.

The survey revealed that in the last six months, these five services alone had supported 702 children and that 42% of these children were groomed online. Of those groomed online, nearly two-thirds (61%) met the perpetrator and were sexually exploited. Almost half of those groomed online were also exploited by more than one offender.

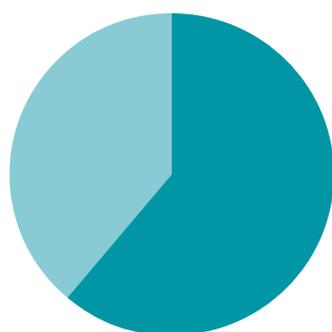
What starts as an innocent and harmless chat with a 'friend', can very quickly develop into a dangerous relationship with devastating consequences. That's why it's crucial parents make their children aware of the dangers online and explain how they can keep themselves safe.

Governments must ensure all primary and secondary school children have age appropriate and sensitive lessons on sex and healthy relationships. These should include the risks of talking to people online and the warning signs of grooming so they can better protect themselves.

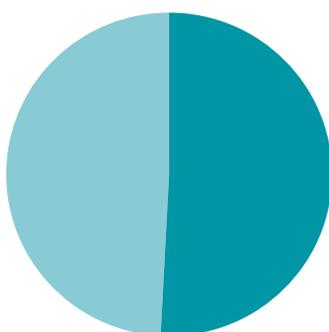
Online grooming

The word 'grooming' is used to describe the process that abusive adults use to trick a child or young person into believing they are trustworthy so that they can eventually sexually exploit them.² This definition also applies to online grooming where the different stages of grooming – targeting, friendship forming, loving relationship and abusive relationship – are applicable. These stages can progress very quickly online and not all stages, such as the loving relationship, may take place.

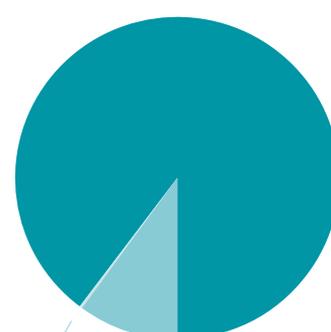
297 children groomed online



182
sexually exploited
by the person that
groomed them



146
sexually exploited
by more than
one perpetrator



1 did not
identify
with a
gender³
30 male
265 female

¹ Palmer, T (2015) [Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people](#). Barnardo's and Marie Collins Foundation.

² Barnardo's (2007) *BWise2 Sexual Exploitation*. England and Wales edition.

³ Gender was not recorded in one case.

Survey findings

Five services took part in the snapshot survey – 2 from England and 1 each from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. All children who had received support in the past six months were included. Of the 702 children that had been supported in the services taking part in the survey, 297 had been groomed online. Of those, nearly two thirds (182) had met the person that groomed them online and had been sexually exploited by them through contact offences.⁴

265 of the children groomed online were female, 30 were male and one did not identify as male or female.⁵ The majority of these children were between the ages of 14 and 17, though some children were as young as 10 years old.⁶

Age	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Number of service users	3	1	6	18	40	67	62	76	20	3

Almost half of children groomed online (146) were exploited by more than one perpetrator. This can include instances where children are groomed online, go on to meet the person who groomed them and be sexually exploited by them and others.

Children were also exploited through the use of technology in other ways. This included sexting, peer exploitation, exchange of films/ photographs, encouragement to self-harm, encouragement to engage in harmful sexual behaviour, and sexual role play through animated profiles or online gaming.

Examples of online grooming and exploitation from our services

A boy aged 15 years old needed money to pay a debt after buying cannabis. He went online and met a man on Facebook who offered to give him money. The man was 40 years old and lived nearby. The boy met the man on numerous occasions and each time the man gave him more money, which he used to buy more drugs. After a while the man asked for 'sexual favours' in return for the money. This led to the man suggesting they sign-up to an online dating app and the boy was made to meet other men who then went on to sexually exploit him.

Josie, aged 12, has mild learning difficulties and autism. She loved a particular series of films on which she was fixated. She was approached by a 28 year old man on Facebook who claimed to be one of the characters from the movie. He got her to send indecent images of herself and he reciprocated by sending naked images of himself. In her mind they were in a relationship and she loved him and he loved her.⁷

⁴ Contact offences describe offences where physical contact takes place between the offender and the victim. Children groomed online can also be abused through non-contact offences where they may be forced to carry out sexual acts with themselves or other people while they are controlled by the offender through online communications.

⁵ Gender was not recorded in one case.

⁶ Age was not recorded in one case. The figures above relate to the age that young people were referred to Barnardo's. Grooming or abuse may have taken place before this.

⁷ Palmer, T (2015) [Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people](#). Barnardo's and Marie Collins Foundation.

Debbie, aged 15, started using Facebook at age 12 and would be added to strangers' lists of friends "they added me and they were talking to me at first and then they asked for pictures. Some I said no to some I didn't really want to but I thought – well if they like me then I felt I had to."⁸

Barnardo's child sexual exploitation services

Barnardo's has 40 child sexual exploitation services working across the UK and in 2015/16 we supported 2,486 young people and families. Our staff work under the '4 As' principles – attention, advocacy, assertive outreach and access – and provide time unlimited support to enable a young person to exit abusive relationships and recover.

As well as providing one-to-one support to children and young people who have been exploited, our services also provide early intervention and prevention work. Many of our services have outreach workers that talk to children in schools about sex and healthy relationships. This work helps to equip young people with the skills and knowledge to help keep themselves safe. Children can also sometimes disclose to workers that they are concerned about a situation they are in through this work.

The **Real Love Rocks** education pack designed by the CSE service, Safer Futures, in the West Region provides information on sex and healthy relationships to primary and secondary school children. It has been delivered by teachers, social workers, youth workers, school nurses and sexual health professionals to more than 14,000 children and young people. The roll-out of the programme has been funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner in Greater Manchester to be delivered to all schools in the local authority.

In recent years the demographic of the service users that Barnardo's provides support to has been changing due to the influence of the internet on sexual exploitation. Our report, *Digital Dangers*⁹, highlighted that in the past our practitioners used to provide support to children who were vulnerable due to a lack of parental support. Now the internet has meant that children who have no existing vulnerabilities and do have parental protection can become victims.

8 Palmer, T (2015) [Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people](#). Barnardo's and Marie Collins Foundation

9 Palmer, T (2015) [Digital Dangers: The impact of technology on the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people](#). Barnardo's and Marie Collins Foundation

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