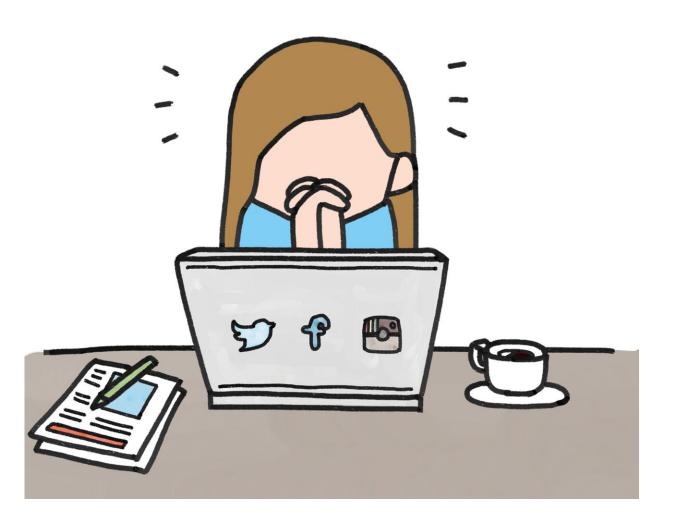# Don't delay talking to girls about keeping safe online, says report

January 11 2024

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Research from Anglia Ruskin University's Policing Institute for the

Eastern Region (PIER) shows that two-way communication, as well as careful monitoring, is the most effective way to prepare girls to handle online requests for indecent images.

The research draws on survey results that were conducted following a public awareness campaign run by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) in 2021. The UK charity is responsible for finding and removing images and videos of child sexual abuse from the internet. The campaign aimed to build resilience among girls and their parents around online requests for sexual imagery.

'Self-generated' child sexual abuse content is created using webcams on tablets, smartphones, or other tech devices, predominantly in children's own homes and without the abuser present. The criminal material is then shared online via a growing number of platforms. In many cases, children are groomed, deceived, or extorted by online predators into producing and sharing sexual images or videos of themselves.

From 2020 to 2021, there was a 168 percent increase in the proportion of web pages displaying self-generated imagery found by the IWF. More than 80 percent of those web pages (147,188 out of 182,281) included images and videos of girls aged from 11 to 13 years old.

This trend has continued. Data from 2022 show that the majority (64%) of the 199,363 web pages containing self-generated videos and images that were removed by the IWF featured 11- to 13-year-old girls.

The report says that parents and caregivers should not wait for the 'right time' to talk to their children, as broaching the issue is unlikely to backfire, and researchers recommend that it is still 'better to talk than not'.

The report analyzed more than 3,000 survey answers from both

parents/caregivers and their daughters, girls aged between 11 and 13 years old. The survey participants, who were not known to be victims of online child sexual exploitation themselves, were asked questions about the IWF public awareness campaign and how they thought they would deal with requests for indecent images.

Commissioned by the Home Office, the report by the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) explored awareness, understanding, and behavior among the survey respondents in relation to the proliferation of self-generated indecent images and videos.

A combination of talking and monitoring measures was found to give girls the best confidence and know-how to respond safely online if they receive requests for explicit material. This could be through ignoring requests, blocking another person, or telling someone, such as a family member or the police.

However, researchers point out that monitoring measures should not be overly restrictive and that talking must be meaningful. Survey responses showed that many girls want to be provided with the practical tools to manage their online lives and to be trusted to do so.

Additionally, parents and caregivers need to keep up to date with technological change and the programs and social media platforms being used so that they can more effectively help girls keep safe online.

The report further recommends teaching children and young people digital literacy and showing them how to engage in activity online using critical and ethical thinking.

Though in the minority, some of the parents surveyed blamed the victims themselves or other parents for the rise in self-generated

material. Researchers note that these attitudes can be unhelpful as they can prevent victimized children and their parents/caregivers from seeking out the help they need.

Susie Hargreaves OBE, Chief Executive of the IWF, said, "The rise of self-generated child sexual abuse content is alarming and complex. It is vital that we equip parents and children with the knowledge to protect themselves and others online without delay."

"During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, many children became used to occupying themselves on the internet, and sadly, this means they have become the targets of predators. These criminals cajole and blackmail children into performing on camera, producing sexual imagery which is often distributed widely afterward."

"Understanding more about self-generated material is vital, and the valuable insights from this study will help the IWF plan preventative campaigns aimed at helping to protect all children from predators online."

Professor Sam Lundrigan, Director of the Policing Institute for the Eastern Region at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said, "It's extremely positive that organizations such as the IWF are developing and exploring ways to raise awareness of and resilience to the threat of online sexual abuse. It's critical, however, that we use insight and evidence to get these messages right."

"This is where research can help, and our team was able to analyze direct feedback from the target audience who needs to hear these messages. The responses were encouraging in the number of young people and parents who want to be well informed on this serious issue, and we now have an evidence base to work on as we develop the best possible ways of helping to keep young people safe."

"Regrettably, we cannot eradicate the threat of online abuse, but we can do everything in our power to help keep children and young people safe online."

The report also found that the two-pronged approach of the IWF campaign—targeting children and parents/caregivers—was effective and recommended that future prevention campaigns and interventions should follow a similar approach.

To ensure that prevention efforts reach as many people as possible, the report says that interventions need to be targeted based on a consideration of a range of factors, such as ethnicity, age, gender, faith/religion, or nationality of families.

With these important findings in mind, the IWF continues to work with PIER researchers in a further phase of this project. Guided by the most recent IWF data, which highlights the increasing involvement of younger children in self-generated child sexual abuse material, it focuses on children and young people aged 8-16 years.

The aim is to establish a stronger evidence base which will help to inform a future public prevention campaign by the IWF. The views and experiences of children and young people, parents, caregivers, and teachers from a wide range of demographics will be examined via research focus groups.

The term 'self-generated' has been used to refer to indecent imagery created by children themselves. The report authors recognize the difficulties posed by this terminology, in that it is widely considered that the term 'self-generated' carries implicit victim-blaming connotations and note the recent recommendation from the APPG on Social Media and UK Safer Internet Centre to switch to 'first-person produced' terminology.

However, to avoid confusion, the 'self-generated' terminology has been used because it accurately reflects the language used within the campaign and survey that are subject to analysis in the report.

More information: Report: [www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we … /talk-trust-empower/](www.iwf.org.uk/about-us/why-we)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University