



Sexual extortion of children

Sexual extortion of children – or sexual blackmail, often referred to as ‘sextortion’ – is when a child or young person is being blackmailed online using self-produced sexual images or videos of themselves.

The victim is initially persuaded to share a sexual image or video of themselves which is then used by the offender to make sexual demands or gain money from the victim by threatening to share the image / video publicly if their demands are not met. By obtaining the initial sexual image/video from the child or young person, the offender is elevated to a powerful position and is able to exert a large degree of control over the young person, often very quickly.

HOW IT HAPPENS?

Typically, sexual extortion begins with the young person and offender engaging in a friendly interaction on a social media platform. The offender will begin asking for nude or nearly nude images of the young person or ask them to share video content of them performing sexual acts via webcam services which is recorded by the offender.

Once sexual images / videos are obtained, the offender will begin making their demands of the young person which can be sexual or financial.

Situations involving sexual extortion can escalate rapidly unlike the grooming process which involves building up trust over time.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON A CHILD

In some instances the abuse can spiral out of control, placing vulnerable victims in danger of self-harm or even suicide.

Offenders can hold such a strong element of power over their victim that the abuse can progress to the victim having to produce sexual material that is increasingly graphic or violent in nature.

By the time the child reaches out for help, there may be extreme time pressures - for example, the child may have been told they have one hour to do ‘x’, or images will be shared publicly - therefore rapid response mechanisms will be key.

WHEN A CHILD MAKES CONTACT DIRECTLY

It is likely that the child will be distressed and will be experiencing a range of emotions when they first make contact with you. They may feel ashamed, embarrassed, confused and scared, and the act of making contact with you in the first instance should be commended. Reassuring the young person that they have made the right decision and that you are there to listen and help them is vital. Equally important is making sure that you tell them that it is not their fault and they are not to blame in any way.

Explain to the young person that together you are going to work through the situation, but first of all you need to determine any immediate risk factors for them – for example on-going contact with the offender, who else they have told. In order to safeguard the young person, you should try and encourage them to share with you the information you require in order to safeguard them - e.g. name, trusted adult, address etc.

Following identification of any immediate risk factors, you should run through some practical questions that will inform your next steps:

- Have you being asked to produce more images?
- What support is available for the child (e.g. trusted adult)?
- What identifying information have they got about the offender; what does the offender know about them?
- What have they shared? Who with? What devices / social networks have they been shared on?

You should advise the young person not to respond to any further communication or threats from the offender. Throughout discussion with the young person, you should consistently encourage them to talk to a trusted adult who can support them in reporting the situation to law enforcement.

WHEN A PARENT / CARER MAKES CONTACT:

It is likely that a parent / carer will feel a range of emotions if they discover that their child has shared nude or nearly nude images / videos online. They may feel angry, confused, scared and may blame themselves for what has happened. What is key, is that they understand that it is not their child's fault and they are not to blame for what has happened.

Express how important it is that the parent listens to what their child is telling them in a non-judgemental manner and they are mindful of how they react to what they are being told. You must advise the parent to keep an open mind to the fact that they may not know the full picture of the abuse at this stage, so they should be prepared for potential further disclosures from their child and ensure they react and respond in a similar way.

If a parent has made contact with you because they suspect that their child has been a victim of sexual extortion, or whether their child has already disclosed that they have a problem, there are a number of things that a parent can do in order to encourage their child to open up, which you may choose to share with parents:

- **Choose the moment carefully.** Do not make your child feel like they have been put on the spot.
- **Find a quiet place.** If your child has built up the courage to disclose a concern, the last thing that they want is to be disturbed.
- **Ask questions.** Try to be non-judgemental and allow your child the opportunity to answer. Try to keep the conversation flowing.
- **Reassure your child.** Tell your child that you believe them and that you are there to help them.

Reassure the parent that their child will be appropriately safeguarded by explaining the referral pathway relevant to your country but also advising the parent how they can pro-actively seek support for their child by signposting to the relevant support services available to the child in your country.

It is important that you both highlight and clarify the emotional impact of such abuse on the child, as it will help the parent understand the importance of taking a supportive approach to their child. Ask the parent:

- Has there been any changes in their child's behaviour?
- Is their child currently involved with any statutory support services or have they been in the past?
- Do they any concerns for the child's mental health currently or historically?

Gathering this information will help inform you of the urgency of any subsequent referral to the statutory support services. You should also ensure the parent is aware of any subsequent changes in their child's behaviour, even if there have been no visible changes reported by the parent to you at this stage.

PRACTICAL ADVICE:

You should advise that there are a number of steps that they can take in order to begin regaining control. If they have shared nude images of themselves which have been posted onto a social networking site(s), then they can contact the site(s) directly via their Safety Centre where members of the public can submit requests for images/videos to be removed. Social networks will remove nude/sexually explicit images of children because they are illegal.

Some social media services and apps have high priority public reporting forms for sexual extortion / blackmail, so that the report is rapidly escalated and prioritised. In addition to removing images/videos, service providers may also use the information provided to investigate the offender's account and, if necessary, shut the offender's account down and report it to law enforcement. Some example links are as follows:

- Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/help/contact/567360146613371>
- Instagram:
<https://help.instagram.com/contact/240773466098227>

RED FLAGS:

- The child is expressing suicidal thoughts, intentions to self-harm or emotional trauma
- The offender is known to the child or young person – e.g. family member, friend or acquaintance



- The child or young person presents to you as still 'at risk' from further abuse / secondary victimisation by the offender
- Existing and outstanding deadline by which the offender's demands need to be met otherwise the victim's images will be publicised

In the case of red flag issues emerging during your conversation, follow your standard escalation processes for intervention by law enforcement, child protection services, and so on, as appropriate.

