



# Practice briefing for professionals working with young people

## Working with young people experiencing or at risk of online abuse

### What is online abuse?

Online abuse is the use of technology to abuse or harm others. Young people are avid users of online technologies for communicating and this creates another avenue for abuse.

#### Examples include:

- Being encouraged to send compromising images of themselves, or to “talk” in an explicit sexual manner, often followed by threats or blackmail that this will be sent to others if they do not comply with requests from the abuser
- Publishing private video footage or photographs of an individual without consent
- Multiple mobile phone calls, emails and/or text messages
- Being asked to take photos showing where they are and who they are with
- Being forced to give passwords for online accounts so their actions and movements can be monitored

Please see this Home Office document for a useful overview of online abuse:

[gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf](http://gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf)

### How common is this?

SafeLives identified that young people experiencing intimate partner violence are extremely vulnerable and are often at high risk of serious harm. In our recent research of 341 young people aged 12-23 years old who were currently experiencing abuse (84%) or who had experienced abuse in the past, one in three (38%) had experienced or were at risk of experiencing online abuse.<sup>1</sup>

### Engaging young people experiencing online abuse

Young people may be reluctant to disclose abuse as they feel embarrassed or ashamed about the content of their communications which could be of a sexualised nature or include information they would not normally discuss with an adult. Additionally, they may fear that they are considered an active participant and therefore partly responsible. Abusive communications can be hidden from caring parents, adults or peers who then find it difficult to take protective action. Also, consider that young people may feel less inhibited online, which means they may use language or send images that they later regret.

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<sup>1</sup> SafeLives (2014) Young people's national dataset January to December 2014. Bristol: SafeLives.

## Practice pointers for engaging with young people experiencing or at risk of online abuse

- Do not assume that the young person recognises that what is happening is abuse
- Know the basics of how young people communicate online. But don't pretend you are "in the know" if something comes up which you have never heard of - ask the young person to explain what it is.
- The young person may fear that disclosing the online abuse will result in limits to their use of online communications. Explain internet safety instead and work around limits so that the young person can continue to use social media
- Don't press the issue if the young person doesn't disclose. Instead work with the young person on a more general theme of abusive behaviour and discuss how it can take place via social media/online.

### Some questions you might want to ask are:

How often do you use the internet/social media to chat with your partner/ex-partner?

What kind of things do you talk about? Does it ever make you feel uncomfortable?

Do you share any intimate pictures or information about yourself online? Do they make you do this? What happens if you don't?

How secure are your accounts? Have you shared passwords with girlfriend/boyfriend/anyone you know, including people you trust?

What site(s) do you use to do this?

Be aware that the young person may minimise both the nature and the amount of abusive content that they receive from their partner in order to protect the relationship.

### Domestic abuse resources

SafeLives has developed a young people's Dash risk checklist and young people's safety plan, in partnership with young people from IKWRO, Leap Confronting Conflict and Barnardo's. Practitioners can use these tools to assess risk and to support and advise young people on how to keep safe. The checklist and guidance is available to download on [safelives.org.uk/practice-support](https://safelives.org.uk/practice-support)

The checklist is not a detailed assessment of online abusive behaviours; however it does prompt the professional to consider how these issues for the victim as part of the assessment process and general discussion.

### Safety planning

The SafeLives safety plan for young people can be accessed on [safelives.org.uk/practice-support](https://safelives.org.uk/practice-support)

### Additional resources and signposting young people

**This is Abuse** [thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk](https://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk)

**AVA** [avaproject.org.uk/media/54339/mates%20ava%20final.pdf](https://avaproject.org.uk/media/54339/mates%20ava%20final.pdf)

**Internet Watch Foundation** [iwf.org.uk](https://iwf.org.uk)

Internet watch foundation are the hotline for reporting criminal online content.

**UK Safer Internet Centre** [www.saferinternet.org.uk](http://www.saferinternet.org.uk)

Offers advice for the children's workforce on online safeguarding matters in relation to children and young people and online issues for staff.

**The Marie Collins Foundation** [mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk](http://mariecollinsfoundation.org.uk)

Offers recovery and intervention services to children and their families who have been affected by online abuse and consultation for professionals

**Facebook Safety Centre** [facebook.com/safety](https://facebook.com/safety)

Information, tools and resources for staying safe on Facebook.

**Child Net** [www.childnet.com/](http://www.childnet.com/)

An organisation working with others to help make the internet a great and safe place for children

**Think U Know** [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)

Run by the Child Exploitation Online Protection unit, it gives up to date information for young people and professionals and advice about how to respond to online abuse.