

# Children's experiences of legal but harmful content online

**This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC helpline contacts to highlight the experiences of young people who have viewed legal but harmful content online.**

**February 2022**

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## Key findings

- Some children told Childline they had actively searched for legal but harmful content, while others had "stumbled" across it unintentionally.
- Some children described content being presented to them in social media feeds.
- Being exposed to legal but harmful content can impact a child's mental and emotional wellbeing; some children told us they were experiencing anxiety, intrusive thoughts, low self-esteem and trouble sleeping.
- Some children told us they found themselves drawn into searching for additional and more extreme content.
- Some felt particular forms of legal but harmful content helped them to deal with difficult issues they were facing.
- Some children and adults were confused about why certain harmful content was permitted online.
- Some adults contacting the NSPCC helpline were unclear on the role of social media companies and believed more could be done to keep their channels safe for children.

## About this briefing

All social media platforms have community guidelines designed to create a safe environment for users to interact. Platforms also have processes in place for reporting or blocking potentially harmful material. Despite these processes, children and young people are still being exposed to harmful content online.

**In this briefing, we highlight the experiences of children and adults who have spoken to our helplines about online pornography, self-generated images, and material which promotes or glorifies eating disorders, self-harm and suicide.**

## How children come across legal but harmful content online

### Accidental discovery

In Childline counselling sessions, some young people who talked about viewing legal online harms had come across this material unintentionally, whilst browsing online spaces which they believed to be safe.

Some told Childline about one-off pieces of harmful content online, which had caught their attention because they had appeared, incongruously, alongside innocent content they were looking at.

**"I recently came across an Instagram page that was sharing what are meant to be funny pictures of people, but one of them was someone's self-harm cuts or scars. Whoever posted this is making it like a laughing joke, which I find sickening. I just feel bad for the person who has to go through this, having something private uploaded to the Internet must be heart-breaking."**

*Boy aged 15, Childline*

Some children talked about seeing legal but harmful posts or videos on their social media feeds. They told us they hadn't been searching for this content; it was something that had been presented to them by the platform they were using.

Scenarios such as this may be indicative of so-called algorithmic profiling, a system employed by tech companies to rank and tailor relevant content for its users, based on user behaviour.

**"Twitter has been recommending me posts about a manga cartoon series I'm really into, however some of the posts really unnerve me. Some show the students from the show in sexual scenarios with their teachers or with other students. The students in the show are, like, 15-16, which makes me uncomfortable because they're minors."**

*Girl aged 18, Childline*

Some adults who contacted the NSPCC helpline talked about children receiving unsolicited messages or links, typically from people the child didn't know offline, including content relating to suicide and self-harm. The adults were worried about the content of these messages and wanted advice on how to keep their children safe online.

**"I'm calling about my 17-year-old son, who was recently sent an inappropriate message on Discord, a social network for gamers. This person, who wasn't known to my son, disclosed how they liked to cut themselves – they then sent pictures of what appeared to be self-harm injuries. I haven't seen these images myself; my son has been reluctant to describe what he saw, beyond saying they were very graphic and he can't get them out of his head. He's also been having trouble sleeping. I'm wondering how best to handle this situation. Is this something we should be reporting to Discord?"**

*Mother, NSPCC helpline*

## Peer pressure

Accessing pornography at school was a growing issue discussed in Childline counselling sessions. Young people told us about fellow pupils having pornographic images and videos on their phones and being forced into looking at them or face being ridiculed for refusing. For some young people, this was the first time they'd been exposed to pornography and they spoke of how shocked and upset this made them feel.

**"I have been bullied into watching pornographic videos by people at school. One of the videos showed a woman pinned to a table like she was being raped – it made me feel sick".**

*Boy aged 13, Childline*

## Searching for content

Childline heard from children and young people who were dealing with eating and body image issues. Some of these children told us they'd been actively searching for pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) content online, whether through online groups or forums, or with the use of social media hashtags such as #proana (an abbreviation of pro-anorexia), #promia (pro-bulimia) and #thinspo (content to inspire a person to lose weight).

The types of content these children talked about included food diaries, "selfie" images, motivational quotes and memes; this was viewed as a source of inspiration, something they could emulate to achieve their ideal body weight.

**"I have been searching ways to starve myself. I found a website with loads of tips and it hooked me straight away, which is kinda scary. I've been reciting some of the quotes I saw on there whenever I feel hungry; I've been drinking loads of water before every meal and also after every few mouthfuls, to try and fill myself up faster; and I've tried to convince myself that the hunger is a sign of me losing weight."**

*Girl aged 17, Childline*

Others told us how they found comfort in this material, describing the pro-ana spaces they'd been visiting online as somewhere they could be accepted and understood by people in similar situations.

**"The last lockdown really messed with my head and I would be up all night crying and upset. I ended up joining a pro-ana group. They were really nice people and understood what it was like. I still go on there sometimes. You probably think that's wrong but the thing is, the people on there aren't bad. Like, they are supportive of each other and I think it's more of a positive place, to be honest. It's just nice to be around people who accept your feelings and don't try to change you."**

*Girl aged 15, Childline*

(In cases such as this, where young people are believed to be engaging in risky coping strategies, Childline counsellors will always seek to offer non-judgemental acceptance, letting the child know that it's okay to feel a certain way and that Childline is here to listen and, where necessary, support them to find safe ways of coping with their situation).

Searching for legal online harms out of curiosity or for educational purposes was another common reason given by young people contacting Childline. This was

particularly true in the case of viewing pornography, which many young people regarded as a normal part of adolescence; some told us they watched porn to learn more about sex or to make sense of their own sexuality.

**"I started watching pornography when I was around 13 or 14, not cos I was horny or anything but because I wanted to educate myself about what really happens. I didn't think my parents or school really did enough in terms of sex education, so I went online."**

*Girl aged 16, Childline*

In a small number of cases, Childline heard from children and young people who had actively searched for legal online harms to test their own bravery. One 13-year-old girl told us she had taken part in an internet "daring challenge".

**"I heard about this thing called Reddit 50/50. Basically, when you enter the challenge, you click on a link to reveal an image and the image will either be one of two things: something cute and funny or something horrifying. I've always been bullied for being weak, so a part of me wanted to do the challenge just to prove that I'm not a cry-baby. I really wish I hadn't though. What I saw made me feel physically sick and dizzy – it was literally the worst thing I've ever seen! I still can't get that picture out my mind. I just want to know how to stop being reminded of it 24/7."**

*Girl aged 13, Childline*

## The impact of viewing legal but harmful content online

Children and young people contacting Childline spoke of the various ways in which legal but harmful content had affected their mental and emotional health; some told us they felt scared and anxious by what they'd seen online, to the point that they were having trouble sleeping or concentrating at school. Others were afraid to go back online and had stopped using certain sites or apps altogether.

Some of the adverse effects that children spoke about were associated with particular forms of harmful content online.

## Suicide and self-harm content

Some children told us they had come across social media posts containing graphic images of self-harm, as well as messages which appeared to promote or actively encourage self-harming behaviours. For young people struggling with self-harm themselves, material of this nature was particularly troubling. One girl shared concern for her friends in recovery who had relapsed after seeing provocative self-harm posts.

**"One of my old friends posts her SH (self-harm) on Twitter, and with no trigger warning too. I basically saw a big-ass hole in her arm, and there were a few pics where her bed sheets were covered in blood. What's worse is she's been messaging some of my friends who are in recovery, saying stuff like, 'hey, wanna cut with me?'. The things she posted on there have made two of my friends relapse already. Normally I'm alright with blood and stuff but seeing those SH images made me shake for at least 2 hours. Today I wasn't able to eat because I still got those images in my mind."**

*Girl aged 14, Childline*

Another girl contacted us after receiving unsolicited self-harm messages within an online game; she spoke of her anger at the way self-harm was seemingly trivialised in these messages.

**"I was playing on Roblox with friends and someone we didn't know was putting inappropriate stuff on the chat about self-harm and how they're gonna do it. It made me really uncomfortable and I asked them to stop, but they just kept on talking about it, saying things like "been there, done that, tried that". They were using smiley faces like it was all a joke to them. I've struggled with self-harming in the past, so part of me wanted to support this person, but another part of me was angry that they were laughing at something that kills a lot of young people."**

*Girl aged 14, Childline*

## Online challenges

Childline counsellors also heard from young people who'd encountered links to dangerous online challenges; a commonly mentioned example was the Blue Whale challenge, in which teenagers are encouraged to perform a series of increasingly extreme tasks including self-harm and even suicide.

Some young people were worried that their failure to participate in these challenges would lead to further malicious advances online; some shared a fear of being "hacked", "traced" or physically threatened by the people behind the challenge.

**"Me and my friends keep getting added to these weird accounts on TikTok – basically, they keep asking us to play a game called Blue Whale and if we say no, they threaten to hurt us and our family. I've tried blocking them, but then more accounts start popping up again. What should we do about it because they said they're gonna kill me in my sleep!"**

*Girl aged 13, Childline*

**"I'm really worried cos someone I know shared a link on Instagram about Blue Whale – I clicked on it cos I thought they were just spreading awareness about the dangers, but it was the actual thing! Now I'm freaking out that I'm going to be messaged by the people running the challenge, as they can see I've viewed the link. I'm worried I won't be able to escape."**

*Girl aged 15, Childline*

For some young people, simply knowing that such content existed was distressing enough for them, even if they hadn't been exposed directly. Some expressed concerns for younger friends or relatives, who they believed wouldn't be able to recognise the risks, or know how to keep themselves safe, if faced with this kind of content.

**"The Blue Whale challenge was around a couple of years ago, but I've heard it's back which makes me anxious. I know what to do if I see anything from accounts trying to get me to play the challenge - and I know who I can talk to about this. I'm mostly worried about my younger sister seeing it and not telling anyone."**

*Boy aged 16, Childline*

## Eating disorder content

Among those children who told us they relied upon pro-ana or pro-mia content – whether for weight loss tips, motivation or social acceptance – some recognised that the same content also left them feeling insecure about their bodies or made existing body image issues worse.

**"I've been restricting a lot for the past few months, trying to stay under 800 calories. I've also tried to make myself throw up but it never worked - I just end up choking. This all started during lockdown when I randomly started watching these eating disorder videos. It became a bit of an obsession to watch them. I felt fine at first, but then I looked in the mirror one day and something just snapped and I started hating how fat my thighs and stomach are."**

*Girl aged 14, Childline*

Exposure to pro-ED content also left a lasting impression on young people without pre-existing eating disorders. Some young people told Childline they felt envious of the physiques being portrayed in this content, to the point that they'd considered unhealthy eating habits.

**"Sometimes I see thinspo girls on Insta and it makes me want to have an eating disorder, which I know is terrible but some of them just look so perfect and it's what I want to look like."**

*Girl aged 15, Childline*

Other children referenced the ubiquity of this content on social networks, and the matter-of-fact language on display, which they felt had the effect of "normalising" unhealthy behaviours and mindsets around food.

**"I recently came across this section on Twitter which was all about weight loss and had threads on how to starve yourself. It had pictures of extreme waists and stuff. There were also these vulgar and mean posts that were intended to motivate people, saying stuff like, 'If you weren't stuffing your face you could look like this, it's all your fault'. It was all so horrifically casual and almost aesthetic. This really affected me, to the point of me crying and having to delete the app entirely. Ever since, I've been feeling strange about myself and my body."**

## Pornography

Some young people spoke of being "obsessed" or "addicted" to certain online material, most notably pornography. For some, visiting adult sites had become part of their daily routine; some worried that they might be watching too much pornography and wanted advice on how they could limit their usage or stop altogether; while some said their addiction had taken over their social lives, as they weren't seeing friends or engaging in hobbies as often.

**"I've been struggling with a porn addiction. I have been trying to stop in many ways, but I can't fix myself, I feel enslaved. Watching porn consumes my time and energy and won't let me focus on anything else. I wish I could be more productive, going outdoors to see real stuff but I have no motivation. I just want to end my addiction and be happy again, but I don't know how."**

*Boy aged 13, Childline*

Among those with addictions to online pornography, some talked about how the material they'd originally started watching had become "boring" or "not exciting enough", and they'd gradually found themselves seeking out more extreme forms of pornography as a result, including violent pornography.

**"I started watching regular porn when I was 12 and it was so easy to access that it made me want more and more. By the time I was 15, I had seen so much it no longer satisfied me, so I tried Hentai (animated porn) and became hooked. Because it's animated, the content is more extreme in nature, like female characters getting raped by monsters. I know that sounds awful, but it was so easy to get sucked in and it desensitised me to a lot of things."**

*Boy aged 17, Childline*

Where boys spoke to Childline about watching online pornography, some were concerned at how this content had shaped their perception of women as sexual objects. One boy told us that pornography had "polluted" his mind and had left him feeling socially awkward around girls.

**"Watching porn was just something everyone in my social group did. I never really thought about how it was polluting my mind until I realised how awkward I am around girls. It's like I'm not able to talk to a girl without seeing them as a sexual object, when I should be seeing them as a human, as a friend, etc. I feel so disgusted with myself, and I just wish I could be normal."**

*Boy aged 18, Childline*

Some young people questioned whether their access to pornography had contributed to them developing harmful sexual behaviours, such as inappropriate touching or sexualised language.

**"Being exposed to porn at such a young age took away my innocence and gave me a false impression of what was right and wrong. I remember I got my first phone when I was 10. The phone didn't have any parent settings on it, so it was easy to find explicit content like porn. I must have got so used to what I saw cos I remember I would often hump one of my best friends whenever we played together. I feel so embarrassed and guilty looking back on it now."**

*Girl aged 15, Childline*

Some young people told us how online pornography had had a negative impact on their relationships, particularly among girls who told us they felt pressured into re-enacting what was shown in these films.

**“My boyfriend told me he likes watching porn, so I said I’d watch it with him. I wish I hadn’t because since then I’ve felt really insecure about my body. All the girls in the porn films were so pretty and perfect, so it’s left me feeling fat and ugly. I’m really down and depressed knowing that’s what I’m being compared to, but my boyfriend doesn’t seem to understand why I’m upset.”**

*Girl aged 16, Childline*

### Self-generated intimate images

Self-generated imagery can be defined as sexual, nude or semi-nude images of children, which have been taken by a child themselves. This can include images that are produced when a child is groomed online by a perpetrator<sup>1</sup>, as well as images that are sent between two children, either consensually or non-consensually. Images may be sexually explicit and classed as child sexual abuse material, or may be nude or semi-nude, partially covered by underwear or clothing. Under UK law, it is illegal to create, possess or share indecent images of children under the age of 18. However, some kinds of imagery may not be classed as illegal, and even non-explicit images of children have the potential to cause considerable harm and distress to young people.

Childline heard from young people – predominantly female - who had shared semi-nude images of themselves via text or through private channels of social media; in some cases, this had opened them up to blackmail to send more explicit self-generated material or to engage in sexual activities online. The greatest threat, according to these children, was for images to be shared on public channels; young people in this position worried this would lead to them being ostracised, bullied or subject to further sexual exploitation online.

**“I don’t send pictures like at all often, but then one night I got chatting with this guy online who I’d never met and he made me feel so good about myself - it felt like someone actually wanted me. I sent him a couple of pics in my bra on Snapchat, but then instantly regretted it. I asked him to delete the pics, but he kept on making me do stuff for him not to post them, like getting me to strip live on camera. I want to block him, but if I do that he will just post the pics. I feel so stupid about it.”**

*Girl aged 14, Childline*

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<sup>1</sup> Our definition of grooming is activity that can be undertaken by either an adult or a child, as we recognise the dynamics of coercion and control that can underpin peer-on-peer abuse.

Some young people who contacted Childline were coming to terms with the fact that they may have been groomed into sharing intimate images of themselves online. For some, this led to feelings of guilt, as they felt they were somehow responsible for what had happened to them.

Feelings of self-loathing were also common amongst this group of children, with some describing themselves as "disgusting", "dirty" or "shameful".

**"During lockdown, I felt so down and bored that I started chatting to strangers online. I even sent semi-nude pictures to some of them cos they made me feel happy about myself. But looking back on it, I just feel so dirty, like I'm tainted. I mean, what 'nice' girl sends pics of herself for attention? I feel less than girls who haven't done stuff like this".**

*Girl aged 16, Childline*

## Getting support

### Barriers to speaking out

Some young people contacting Childline spoke of their reluctance to tell anyone else about viewing legal but harmful content. Some feared their association with certain material could harm their education or future career, while some were afraid of being judged and nobody believing that their discovery of harmful content was accidental.

**"I accidentally stumbled upon a website that I didn't understand. I only found it after I typed in the wrong URL and it instantly took me there. I think it might be a front for child pornography but I can't be sure. I want to report the site but I know that just being on a website like this could make me look bad. I'm worried I'll get into trouble."**

*Boy aged 16, Childline*

Where online pornography was concerned, some children, particularly those of primary school age, were worried about parental reactions and having their devices confiscated. Others felt confused by the stigma surrounding pornography, and they were unsure if it was "normal" or "okay" to watch it.

**"I don't understand why porn is considered bad. I think in this day and age, it's normal and 90% of the boys I know openly say they watch it. I don't feel guilt or shame, and my outlook on life or respect for women hasn't changed. I guess I just wondered, if a kid can understand the difference between porn and the reality of sex then what's the harm?"**

*Boy aged 15, Childline*

Some children were confused about the legality of harmful content they'd seen online, and they weren't sure whether they should report their concerns to platform owners. We heard from one 16-year-old boy who had come across images of children which, at first glance, appeared to be innocent but had left him feeling uneasy.

**"I can't decide if the website was bad or not, it just seemed creepy. I'm just really confused on the laws around pictures like this. My mum said they weren't likely to be reported to the police because they weren't explicit enough. I've tried researching the laws on this stuff but it doesn't make sense to me. It feels like nothing gets removed unless it's really serious and that can't be okay."**

*Boy aged 16, Childline*

### Reporting harmful content to platforms

Some young people said they had tried to report legal but harmful content to platform owners and moderators. Some felt frustrated by this experience, as platforms had been slow to respond and act upon their reports. In some cases, young people had not heard back from platforms at all and the harmful content they were concerned about was still live.

**"There's these accounts on TikTok promoting bulimia, anorexia etc. and rating people's bodies. I've tried reporting them to TikTok but nothing's happening. I don't know what more I can do. This kind of content can be so damaging for some people – it makes me sick!"**

*Girl aged 13, Childline*

We also heard from young people whose requests to remove harmful content had been denied, as the content in question was deemed not to have breached a platform's community standards.

**"I discovered these vile fan fiction stories which described child characters in sexual situations. I tried reporting them to the website, but they said the only way a story could be taken down was if it contained images of child porn, or if it condoned or suggested the things happening in the story should happen in real life. Apart from that, pretty much anything was fair game. I really worry that children much younger than me might see these stories and become traumatised."**

*Girl aged 16, Childline*

Some adults who contacted the NSPCC helpline had also reported legal but harmful content to social networks. However, some were unclear about what action platforms were taking to keep their channels child-safe, beyond removing harmful content after it had been published.

Some questioned whether social networks should be doing more to protect children who encounter legal harms on its channels, such as providing links to suitable support services. Others felt more proactive steps were needed to prevent such content from appearing in the first place.

**"I recently saw this TikTok video which had a trigger warning and it showed a young girl dancing with blood on her neck; she was smiling and there were heart emojis emanating from her neck. The words 'self-harm' and 'scars' also appeared in the list of tags. I've reported videos like this in the past, but I guess I've not really thought much about it. I'm not really sure what social media companies actually do other than remove dangerous posts."**

*Member of the public, NSPCC helpline*

### How Childline responds: a case study

Childline is here to listen and support children about anything that's bothering them.

In addition to phone and online counselling, Childline also provides a range of information and advice services on its website. This includes **Ask Sam**, a problem page where children and young people can ask questions about anything at all. Replies are made public on the website, so others can read and learn from them. Any personal information will be removed to protect children's identity.

One young person wrote an Ask Sam letter, wanting advice about some videos they'd seen on YouTube; they weren't sure of the nature of these videos or if they'd get into trouble for viewing them. We've included this child's letter below, followed by Childline's response.

#### Accidentally saw something bad

Hi Sam,

When I was on YouTube, I came across a video of the bottom part of someone's face and their top was a bit low so you could see part of their cleavage. It was hard to tell their age to me. The comments kept saying it was a child and to report it but I panicked and clicked off.

Another time I found a video of a girl swimming, nothing sexual but the comments where creepy and it had a weird vibe because there was no speaking and I felt that some of the shots were kind of close to her butt, but I couldn't really tell if it was on purpose so I reported it anyway to YouTube just in case.

Can I be arrested for viewing this because I can't sleep anymore thinking I could be and humiliated in front of family and have my life ruined. It was an accident and I reported it and the nature of these videos is hard to tell if its dodgy.

### *Childline's response*

Hi there,

You might be worried about something you've seen online. It could be something that you've seen on social media, a music or gaming site or a link you clicked on in your search results.

You might see something online accidentally and feel worried about getting into trouble for watching something bad or illegal. Being online can be scary sometimes and you might not be sure about what you've seen. Sometimes people create films of young people's bodies on purpose. Or people might make sexual comments on videos that are about normal, everyday things. It can be hard for you to know what's okay and what's not.

Online safety is all about **keeping safe online** and knowing who to tell if you're worried about something you've seen. It's against the law for anyone to share a naked or sexual image of someone who's under 18 or someone who might've turned 18 since the film was made. The law is there to protect young people, not to get you into trouble. If you've seen something you think could be illegal you can report it to the site where you saw it. Don't share it with anyone and don't keep watching anything that upsets you.

If you want, you can tell the police about what you saw. If you see sexual photos or videos of young people online you can report them using **ThinkuKnow** - a website for young people run by specialist police. This helps to keep other young people safe and you might feel better having done something about it. Your online safety and your feelings are what matter most.

Seeing disturbing things online can be hard to forget so you should make sure you look after yourself as well. You might feel like talking to **an adult you trust** about what happened if you see something that makes you feel uncomfortable. You could also talk to a **Childline Counsellor**, they're always here for you.

Take care. Sam

## Conclusion

This briefing highlights various examples of legal but harmful content that young people encounter online. While some told Childline they'd consciously searched for specific legal harms online as a source of support, most children typically "stumbled" across harmful content while playing or socialising on their favourite platforms; this left many feeling scared, insecure and afraid to speak out.

The apparent ease at which young people come by legal but harmful content online, whether intentionally or not, is a significant concern.

The NSPCC has been a leading voice for social media regulation. Our Wild West Web campaign, launched in 2018, played a key part in the UK government's commitment to introduce new online safety laws, details for which were later outlined in their draft Online Safety Bill, in May 2021. Under this proposed legislation, tech firms will have a legal responsibility to proactively identify potential risks to children associated with age-inappropriate or harmful content. Companies which fail to comply with this child safety duty will be liable to enforcement action, including financial sanctions.

For this legislation to be successful, we believe the regulator must adopt a child-centred and harm-based approach to legal but harmful content online. Its regulatory approach must take decisions that are appropriately balanced against freedom of expression, but that respond to the very significant potential for harm caused by platform algorithms targeting damaging eating disorder, self-harm and suicide posts at children.

We are at a critical time in campaigning where we can really make the difference to make sure the Online Safety Bill sets the global standard in protecting generations of children online.

➤ [Find out more about our campaign calling for legislation of social media.](#)

## Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact Childline and the NSPCC helpline, the counsellors record what they tell us.

The insight in this briefing is taken from those Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts where the counsellors recorded information about legal but harmful online content.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and adults involved. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

### + Further support and information



Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.



Contact the **NSPCC helpline** if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child.



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection.

