

DIGITAL MEDIA

Risks to children online

Online abuse is any type of abuse that happens on the web, whether through social networks, playing online games or using mobile phones. Children and young people may experience cyber bullying, grooming, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or emotional abuse. Among the risks online - when using the internet, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, email and chatrooms - is exposure to inappropriate material, whether through verbal messages, or the use of photography or imaging.

Use of abusive images

- Photos and videos can be taken of children which show them in a sexualised way or actually being abused
- Images of children can be manipulated to depict them in sexualised positions

Pornography and sexual abuse online

- Child pornography can be described as the depiction of children, often in a sensual or erotic way (in pictures or in written descriptions) intended to cause sexual excitement for the viewer/reader.
- Children are abused and exploited in the making of pornography and are further abused each time their image is viewed
- Those involved in the production and spreading of indecent images, photographs, and videos of children, can be located anywhere in the world.
- Innocent pictures of children can be manipulated for the purpose of sexual gratification of abusers.
- Young people have become involved in the viewing, possession, making and distribution of indecent and/or child abuse/pornographic images
- It is an offence for children who have reached the age of criminal responsibility and for adults, to produce and/or disseminate images which exploit and sexually abuse children.

Sexting

- Sexting involves a child/adolescent sending text messages which use sexually explicit language, images or video on their mobile phone, computer or tablet.
- A child receiving such messaging may feel under pressure to pose in sexually explicit ways and send images of themselves naked and/or performing sexual acts.
- An adult can send sexually inappropriate and sexually explicit images to a child through sexting.

Sextortion

- Sextortion is the solicitation of minors for sexual purposes. Victims are pressurised to give sexually explicit photos and/or favours in exchange for their secrecy of previously obtained private information or for a promise to hold off on future violent acts.

Exploitation

- Children can be exploited by adults and by other children for their sexual gratification, in person and online.
- Exploitation involves using children for sexual purposes
- It can take the form of engaging a child in sexual acts directly or by video/webcam.

Emotional abuse

- Whether the sexual abuse happens in person or online, children who are sexually abused also suffer long lasting emotional abuse.

Cyber Bullying

- Cyber Bullying is the use of new technologies (internet, mobile phone or any other method) that allow bullies to anonymously torment their victims.
- Cyber Bullying includes:
 - Sending threatening or abusive text messages
 - Creating and sharing embarrassing images or videos
 - 'Trolling' – sending menacing or upsetting messages on social networks, chat rooms or online games
 - Excluding children from online games, activities or friendship groups
 - Setting up hate sites or groups about a particular child
 - Encouraging young people to self-harm
 - Voting for or against someone in an abusive poll

- Creating fake accounts, hijacking or stealing online identities to embarrass a young person or cause trouble using their name
- Sending explicit messages (also known as sexting)
- Pressuring children into sending sexual images or engaging in sexual conversations.

Grooming

Grooming is the development of a relationship between an adult and a child, where the adult is pretending to be the child's friend online. The purpose is to gain the child's trust so that they can then move to using the child for sexual gratification, abuse or exploitation. Grooming can be more prolific online where the identity of the groomer can remain anonymous. Children should not divulge personal information (full name, age, address, email address, phone number, hobbies, names of their school, etc) to someone they meet on the internet.

Physical Danger

Risk of real physical danger arises when there is an encouragement for them to meet the person who has contacted them online. Invitation is often from an adult masking as a child.

Online Cliques

Some young people may be encouraged to engage in inappropriate, antisocial or illegal behaviour while using digital technologies. Groups or cliques can form online and activities that start out as harmless fun, such as voicing an opposing opinion to another member of a chat room, can quickly escalate to something much more serious.

Anonymity of abuser online

The identity of the abuser online can be disguised through the use of false names, age and location. Adult abusers can groom children by pretending to know their networks and by hiding their real identity in order to obtain identifying information from the child. The abuser can trick the child into sending photographs, performing sexual acts online, and/or agreeing to meet. All concerns must be reported to the Gardai if there are doubts about the true identity and motive of the person a child is engaging with online.

PROTECTIONS

Each user is responsible for the information or data that is on their electronic device. It is not acceptable to behave or communicate in ways which might suggest that you are trying to develop a personal relationship with a child. It is never appropriate to post any content that could be deemed abusive, defamatory, obscene or libellous or that indicate or appear to endorse grossly irresponsible behaviour or law breaking of any kind.

Child safety can be enhanced by:

- Having an internet procedure which contains rules for safe use of all electronic technologies
- Having e-safety agreements
- Installing appropriate software to improve safety
- Having written agreements in place with children and their parents about the use of technology, text messaging and use of language and imaging
- Having a web camera use procedure
- Having protocols about adults' communication with children which is in keeping with the ethos and in line with the need to safeguard children
- Having user names, logins and passwords so that log on access is controlled
- Not communicating with children through a personal e-mail address or sending personal messages to a child, or using personal social networks to engage with a child. It is not appropriate to accept a child as a friend on a personal page.
- Ensuring that all forms of abuse online, including bullying, grooming, are reported.
- Ensuring that all material posted online is appropriate (both age and content appropriate), is not misleading and is socially acceptable
- Ensuring that the online material is monitored regularly and that any offensive or inappropriate material is removed.
- Protecting personal information by not allowing public access to email addresses, mobile numbers, etc. Sharing of information needs to be monitored to ensure minimal appropriate information is shared.
- Ensuring photographs and images are only used for defined purposes and having appropriate consents.

- Examining and assessing risks of electronic communication, particularly when starting a new venture or with the introduction of new technology
- Having internet procedures which contains rules for safe use of all electronic equipment.

SUMMARY

DO

- Ensure your mobile phone, computer, notebook and other technological equipment is password/PIN protected.
- Have a separate online account/identity which is not your personal one to distinguish between personal communication and your ministry.
- Have clarity around the use of personal equipment when communicating with children in ministry.
- Make sure that anything that is posted online by you is appropriate; remember that once it is posted online it is public. This includes chats and images/photographs.
- Switch off Bluetooth as this allows another person to access your equipment and pretend to be you.

DO NOT

- Share your personal information with children.
- Use your personal mobile phone to communicate with children by phone call, text, email, social networking site.
- Access or share inappropriate images of children
- Add or allow a child whom you are ministering to join your contacts/friends list on personal social networking profiles.
- Play online games with children; always check before you play online with someone you do not know.

(Based on GAP publication of the National Board)