

**Reframing the Term ‘Sextortion’ to ‘Sexually Coerced Extortion Online’**

This type of exploitation is often referred to as ‘sextortion’, but we believe that it is important to emphasize the role which coercion plays in this type of exploitation and to remind professionals that this kind of act with a child is sexual abuse. Children under 16 cannot legally consent and so should never be held responsible for this exploitation. Evidence so far suggests that not all crimes are sexually motivated, and that the **financial** aspect is also vital to consider.

Increasingly children are being targeted for sexually coerced extortion online. At present this type of exploitation and the impact it has on children and young people is often under-recognized. It can often be seen as an isolated incident meaning victims are not receiving the safeguarding and support, they may be entitled to.

We are working to shine a light on this issue, to equip professionals to know what this type of exploitation looks like and what support is available.

What is Sexually Coerced Extortion Online?

A type of exploitation which is initiated in online spaces. The model involves children being groomed to create images or videos of a sexual nature, often with the child being naked or masturbating. Once the perpetrator has received these images, or screenshotted videos of the child, they then threaten that this content will be shared unless the child is compliant to their demands.

In some cases the perpetrator may use the threat of sharing these images to further sexually exploit the child. However, a model we increasingly aware of is where children are told they must pay the perpetrator to avoid having their images publicly shared.

How does Sexually Coerced Extortion Online Happen?

At present, teenage boys are the most common victims of this type of exploitation, according to data from police reports, although we would encourage professional curiosity around this gap in the data as young people of all genders can be victims of this type of abuse. Across the Northeast, Northwest and Yorkshire, the majority of victims have been 13+, but there is a concern that younger children are increasingly being targeted.

Generally, victims are targeted on social media or via gaming platforms. A child is tricked into believing that they are speaking to someone (usually a girl) either their own age, or slightly older. This perpetrator often sends explicit images first before requesting images, or time on webcam in return, where screenshots are taken or the child masturbating or performing other sexual acts. The perpetrator then sends the child a message demanding payment in return for not sharing their images. Ransom amounts have been between £10 and £2,500, with some children paying up to £1,000 to keep their images private. The perpetrator will often demand that the child makes payment into a bank account online, but in some cases they have asked for gift cards, or used an app to take money.

What is the impact on children and young people?

As well as the potential financial harm to a child, the mental health consequences of sexually coerced extortion online are enormous. Nationally, there have been a number of deaths by suicide linked to cases of sexually coerced extortion and professionals have noted experiences where victims stopped attending school as a result of the anxiety and shame caused by perpetrators. The isolation caused can put the child at further risk of exploitation and harm. Some professionals feel that the lack of support for children once they do disclose can exacerbate the negative feelings they are experiencing.

What can you do?

* Look out for potential **indicators.** These may include a child suddenly becoming withdrawn, avoiding school, showing emotional distress, having less money than usual or expressing suicidal thoughts.**[[1]](#footnote-2)**
* Build a trusting, professional relationship with the child to enable them to **disclose** if needed.
* Remaining **judgement free** is important as many children who have been exploited this way have experienced victim blaming, which is intentionally utilized by perpetrators to exacerbate feelings of shame in order to further isolate the child. Be understanding and reassuring. See [our language guide](https://www.flipsnack.com/CA7CFEBBDC9/child-exploitation-appropriate-language-guide-2022-hj523jkrzp/full-view.html) for more support.
* Ensure that you **know how to report** any concerns which you do have and that you are able to be clear with the child about what the next steps will be.
* As part of the conversation with the child you will need to explore whether it is safe for them to break off contact, or whether this could result in further danger or [**debt bondage.**](https://www.flipsnack.com/CA7CFEBBDC9/exploitation-glossary/full-view.html)
* It is important to be aware that abuse and exploitation may not stop even if a child has paid the perpetrator and to consider whether the child may have been forced to share any of their **friends’** details with this person.
* Share any relevant **intelligence** with police and local safeguarding arrangements and advocate for **disruption** tactics to be put in place to stop the perpetrator from moving on to exploit a different child.
* Consider what **support services** may be available in your local area, if nothing is available, how can you advocate for the need for these services?
* Talk to young people about internet safety and encourage them to know they can disclose. Ensure that these conversations do not make gendered assumptions about who might be targeted.

Want further support and guidance? Use these links:

[Report Harmful content here](https://reportharmfulcontent.com/)

[Get images removed here](https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/)

[Report abuse to the IWF](https://www.iwf.org.uk/)

[Report concerns about online abuse](https://www.ceop.police.uk/Safety-Centre/)

[See support available to professionals](https://saferinternet.org.uk/professionals-online-safety-helpline)

[Learn more about responding to child exploitation](https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/)

If you want to provide any feedback on this guidance, or if you are interested in being part of the Northern working group around sexually coerced extortion online, hosted by The Children’s Society, then please do contact: **rosemary.plummer@childrenssociety.org.uk**

1. [Help if you're worried about 'sextortion' or online blackmail (iwf.org.uk)](https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)