



# Online sexual abuse - webcam and images

An increasing number of children are being sexually abused over webcam. This can be just as harmful as 'contact' sexual abuse.

## Sexual abuse on webcam

In cases of sexual abuse on webcam the children involved never meet the offender face to face and all of the abuse takes place online on cam.

## How does this happen?

Though the ways they do it vary, the basic tactic used by offenders is to trick or persuade a young person to share a sexual image, strip or perform sexual acts on webcam.

They might do this by grooming the child, building a relationship with them in which the child feels love or a sense of obligation to the offender. They might pretend to be the same age as the child, flirting with them and asking them to engage in sexual acts. In some cases they will use information which the young person has shared, for example personal problems or family difficulties, as leverage to get the young person to go on webcam or share a sexual image.

Once they have an image or video they will then use it to blackmail them, telling the child that if they don't do what they say they will share the image or video online.

Children then feel trapped, forced to do whatever the offender wants or face the embarrassment of family or friends seeing them naked or engaging in sexual acts.

This can start a cycle of abuse with offenders making increasing demands for the children to appear on webcam and perform sexual acts. In some cases they have been forced to physically hurt themselves or involve other children. The children in these cases often feel that there is no way out and that they can't tell anyone, even though it's never their fault, the offender has committed a serious sexual crime and the images are evidence of *their* crime.

## What's the impact of sexual abuse on webcam?

Even though the children involved may never meet the offender face to face, this is sexual abuse.

Children forced, tricked or persuaded to participate in the abuse, for example by performing sexual acts on themselves, may be left with long term trauma from the experience and can suffer just as much harm as those who are abused by an offender in the 'real' world.

The existence of images can make it hard to feel that the abuse has come to an end and young people may struggle, feeling that they were to blame even though their actions were directed by the offender. Young people also describe finding it hard to know who to trust after such deception and betrayal online.

### **Why would a young person engage in sexual acts on webcam?**

It can be traumatic for parents to discover that their children were having sexual conversations and were tricked into sharing sexual images or videos in the first place. Many parents feel a range of emotions from confusion to horror and grief. They may also feel angry with their child.

Whilst feeling angry is understandable it's important that the child knows that they are not at fault. As young people reach adolescence and develop sexually, their interest in sex and relationships increases as does risk-taking which is a normal part of adolescent development.

Most young people are comfortable communicating and sharing online so it is understandable that they may use the internet to explore sex and relationships. This may be natural but there are some very real risks.

Shame and fear of being blamed, however, can be a major barrier to children seeking help so it's important that children are helped to recognise that responsibility lies entirely with the offender.

### **Lies offenders tell to children and young people**

Offenders will lie to young people to maintain control over them. Here are some of the lies they tell, and the truths behind them.

- ***"If you do this for me I'll leave you alone"*** The more young people do for them the more power offenders will think they have. No matter how far things have gone the best thing a young person can do if someone threatens them online is to get up, walk away and tell someone as soon as they can.
- ***"The police will never find me, I've hidden myself on the internet"*** No matter what clever tricks they claim to be using, everyone leaves a 'digital footprint' online. CEOP and the police are very good at tracking these people down, even if they're not in the UK.
- ***"If you don't do more for me I'm going to share this image"*** Although it does happen at times, offenders often don't share the images - even when they've threatened to. It's not in their best interests. The more information they share, the easier it is for the police to track them down.
- ***"If I share this image you'll never get over it"*** Young people might feel they have no way out but this isn't true. Children should be made aware that all problems can be solved with support and that many young people who have sadly had their images shared have gone on to feel better in time. Once the abuser is out of their life, even if their images are 'out there', young people can start to rebuild a sense of control.

- ***“It’s your fault for doing it in the first place”*** It’s never the young person’s fault. If they’ve sent a naked image or stripped on webcam, the only person responsible is the one who asked them to do it. They have committed a serious crime.
- ***“There’s no one who can help you. I’m in control”*** Let your child know that you will always be there to help them but if things have happened which they are too embarrassed to talk to you about then there are a support mechanisms available.

This information has been adapted from the Thinkuknow parents and carers website – [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents)

Thinkuknow is the education programme from the National Crime Agency CEOP command. The CEOP command works to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation both online and offline.

Professionals working with children and young people or their families, can access information, guidance and all Thinkuknow resources and materials at the Thinkuknow professionals site – [www.new.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals](http://www.new.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals)

The CEOP Safety Centre offers information and advice for children and young people, parents/carers and professionals on reporting child sexual exploitation and abuse and provides a route to report directly to CEOP – [www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre](http://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre)

