

Self-generated sexual material online: Literature Review

Praesidio
safeguarding

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What is known about child ‘self-generated’ sexual material

The definition of child ‘self-generated’ sexual material is a complex one that many professionals and policy makers are currently grappling with. This is partly because, as we explore below, the definition contains within it a such a broad range of relational dynamics, interactions, and image-sharing scenarios that it can now be said to account for a high proportion of the child abuse content currently being shared online.¹ The term ‘self-generated’ includes within it the content created within children and young people’s peer or online relationships that may constitute a positive and consensual exploration of their sexuality. On the other hand, other ‘self-generated’ material may occur following unwanted pressure or harassment within relationships or even directly through the circumstances of grooming, exploitation, abuse and coercion by adults or other peers.

We Protect Global Alliance’s 2021² Threat Assessment identified an increase in the sending of ‘self-generated’ material, drawing upon data and analysis from the Internet Watch Foundation in the UK.³ The threat assessment reflects that this increase has occurred amidst uncertainty about how best to respond to the issue:

“Child ‘self-generated’ material comprises an increasing proportion of child sexual abuse content. Recently the volume of ‘self-generated’ material has spiked dramatically. This escalation has been partly attributed to the ‘perfect storm’ created by the COVID-19 pandemic: children spending more time online, and reduced opportunities to commit ‘in-person’ abuse fuelling online offending and demand for imagery.”

It identifies the importance of understanding the range and diversity of young people’s own motivations or reasons for sending ‘self-generated’ imagery. It also states the need to centre children’s experiences and voices to properly understand this phenomenon. For example: “In such scenarios, harm is typically caused when imagery is (re)shared against a young person’s wishes. Across 39 different studies involving 110,380 participants aged 12 to 17, 12% reported forwarding [another person’s] ‘self-generated’ sexual image without [that persons] consent.”

1 <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>

2 <https://www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf>

3 <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>

Importantly, it concludes that:

“Long-term sustainable prevention will require considered approaches grounded in the complex experiences of children and young people grappling with self-discovery in the digital age. Given that sharing ‘self-produced’ sexual images is not uncommon and does not always cause harm, excessive focus on potential negative outcomes risks being dismissed by young people.”

The recognition of both prevalence of this phenomenon, the diversity of different dynamics it includes and the need to speak to children in ways that they recognise, and which connect with their own experience of this issue - underpins this research.

Categorising different kinds of ‘self-generated’ material

For the purposes of clarity and consistency, this report uses the 2021 Global Threat Assessment definitions of ‘self-generated’ sexual material described below:

Non-sexual material is ‘self-generated’ - content that is not sexual in nature but is misappropriated and used in connection with child sexual exploitation and abuse online. This might include for example, a child semi-naked on a beach. Although the victims may be unaware, such material facilitates offender activity.⁴ In some cases, direct harm is also caused to victims as a result of offenders manipulating images to appear sexual, and then blackmailing children by threatening to share them.

Voluntarily ‘self-generated’ material is usually shared between adolescent peers. This category covers ‘self-production’ by adolescents only, because younger children cannot consent, and therefore ‘self-production’ involving them cannot be considered ‘voluntary’. In such scenarios, harm is typically caused when imagery is (re)shared against a young person’s wishes.

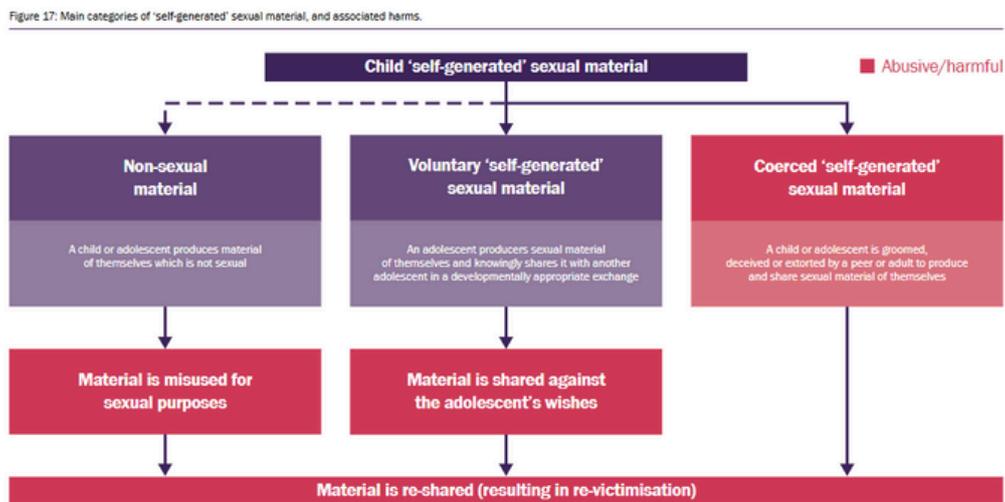
Coerced ‘self-generated’ - involves the grooming of children to cause the creation of sexual imagery and has been linked to ‘capping’.⁵ Children involved in ‘coerced self-production’ may not perceive themselves to be victims, and may potentially view their own actions as voluntary.

4 See for example <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/pinterest-algorithm-young-girls-videos-grown-men-investigation-rcna72469>. Such activity is also a violation of the rights of the child in the image even if they are not directly harmed.

5 See <https://www.inhope.org/EN/articles/what-is-capping?> Capping is the act of capturing imagery of videos of others performing sexual acts without their knowledge or consent. WeProtect Global Alliance also includes in the definition of capping the act of capturing innocuous imagery of children and using it for sexual purposes. The recording might be created for multiple reasons:

- To add to the individual’s personal collection of material they find erotic.
- To share with others
- To sextort the individual into performing further sex acts or transferring money

This is represented in Figure 17⁶ of the Global Threat Assessment shown below:



In existing research literature, there is often a mix of terminology used and much of the literature refers to 'sexting' or 'sending/sharing nudes', which can include coercive or exploitative interactions alongside consensual content sharing.

In line with this typology, we seek to distinguish between content that has been created 'voluntarily' between adolescent peers and that which has been generated by grooming, coercion and exploitation throughout our analysis.

Research and data on the nature and prevalence of sexual exploitation and abuse online

Reports from law enforcement and specialist agencies

A number of law enforcement agencies have reported a rise in online grooming and exploitation whereby children are coerced into sexual activity and the creation of 'self-generated' images and video as a result of that interaction.⁷ The increase in online grooming has been identified as one of the drivers of 'self-generated' material creation.⁸ A 2020 study from the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children in the US identified a near doubling in reports made to the

⁶ <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/> (p54)

⁷ See for example Europol reporting pages 36 -41 Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2020 (IOCTA 2020) and page 25, IOCTA 2021. IOCTA 2020, available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2020#downloads> and IOCTA 2021 at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2021>

⁸ <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

CyberTipline regarding 'online enticement' (which includes an adult communicating with a child in order to sexually offend or with the intent to abduct the child) ? Similarly, a survey of law enforcement conducted in 2020 documents an increase in attempts by adults to contact children compared to previous years.¹⁰

There is also evidence of children creating 'self-generated' material in exchange for payment. Commercially motivated 'self-production' is when children create sexual images or videos of themselves in exchange for payment. Reports of commercially motivated 'self-generation' have emerged in a number of contexts.¹¹ In the Philippines, for example, authorities have uncovered instances of teenagers creating groups on social platforms to sell sexual images and videos "to fund expenses in online learning".¹² One such group amassed 7,000 members before it was taken down. In Cambodia, some young people (mostly girls) were found to be using their sexual material to sell cosmetic products online.¹³ In these scenarios it appears that this self-commodification becomes a coping mechanism of poverty, scarcity and the closing of legitimate avenues of opportunity, but enabled by a broader context of the sexualisation of children online, and the minimisation of their sexual harm.

In 2021, the UK's reporting hotline the IWF - actioned 182,281 webpages that were assessed as containing 'self-generated' imagery compared to 68,000 webpages containing 'self-generated' images in 2020 - almost 2.5 times as many. The IWF reported that each of these 147,188 reports included a child who was between the ages of 11-13-year-old girl¹⁴, who had been groomed or coerced into sending 'self-generated' sexual images or video. They report that frequently, these child sexual abuse images and videos have been produced using live streaming services, then captured and distributed widely across other sites by offenders.¹⁵

9 <https://www.missingkids.org/content/ncmec/en/blog/2021/online-enticement-reports-skyrocket-in-2020.html>

10 <https://www.datocms-assets.com/74356/1662373830-netcleanreport-2020.pdf>

11 See for example <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-57255983>

12 Faster Takedown of Online Sexual Abuse Sought (Manila-Standard.Net, 2021) Accessed from: <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/349129-06/05/2021320>

13 WeProtect Global Alliance Global Threat Assessment <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

14 Each report included a child within this 11-13 age band, and it is the age that the IWF see the most. These reports are compiled from proactive searches for this content as well as from taking reports from the public.

15 Further information about the latest trends in self-generated child sexual abuse material identified by the IWF can be found in the IWF annual reports <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>

Research on the prevalence of online sexual harms¹⁶

A number of recent large scale survey studies have found that globally children's exposure to online sexual harms is high. A 2021 survey of 5,000 18–20 year olds in 54 countries found that 34% percent respondents who had had regular access to the internet as children reported that they had been asked to do something sexually explicit online when they were teenagers that they were uncomfortable with and did not want to do, and that 29% had received sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know online.¹⁷ The survey also found that of those surveyed who had regular access to the internet as children – 29% had had someone share their sexually explicit images and videos of themselves without permission. It should be noted that this is a significantly higher percentage than the majority of other prevalence studies on this issue.

Another substantial survey project exploring the prevalence of online sexual abuse across 13 South East Asian and African countries found across each country between 1–20% of children surveyed self-reported at least one form of child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the last year. Online child sexual exploitation was defined in the study as: someone offering money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos, someone offering money or gifts online to meet in person to do something sexual, someone sharing sexual images of you without your consent, someone threatening or blackmailing you online to engage in sexual activities.¹⁸

Recent national surveys in the United States, run by Thorn, found that the experience of online sexual interactions and encounters are highly prevalent among American children.¹⁹ Its 2020 survey of 2,002 children from across the United States, including 742 9–12-year-olds and 1,260 13–17-year-olds, found a high level of exposure to risk on the major online platforms that children use. The survey identified that 40% had been asked for nude photos or videos by people online that they did not know (including 28% of the 9–12-year-olds). Thorn's most recent survey²⁰ with self-reported data from 1,141 9–17-year-olds from 2021 found that 22% of children reported having online sexual interactions with adults (the same percentage as kids who report having sexual interactions with peers their own age). Also from the US, a recent survey study of 2,600 young adults which sought to measure the prevalence of multiple forms of online child sexual abuse found that 15.6 % of young adults in the US had experienced at least one type of sexual abuse online before the age of 18.²¹

16 This term has been defined in the Economist Impact Study (<https://www.weprotect.org/economist-impact-global-survey/>) to mean A set of harmful behaviours considered as risk factors for potential or actual child sexual exploitation and abuse online. We assess a range of studies in this section that explore different kinds of harmful behaviours that children experience online.

17 <https://www.weprotect.org/economist-impact-global-survey/>

18 UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti (2022). Children's Experiences of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in 12 Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

19 Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization (2021) www.thorn.org

20 Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspective on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021, (2023) www.thorn.org

21 Finkelhor D, Turner H, Colburn D. Prevalence of Online Sexual Offenses Against Children in the US. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022;5(10):e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471

Global evidence base on 'sexting' and the exchange of sexual content between peers

The research that specifically focuses on the 'self-generated' material between adolescents (often described as 'sexting' or 'sharing nudes') can be difficult to interpret as it often includes looking at potentially consensual actions alongside the harmful and exploitative elements of this behaviour, perhaps in part because they can be difficult to disentangle. In some quantitative studies on 'sexting', the definitions combine or conflate consensual and non-consensual acts and ignore the relationship context for these interactions making it difficult to fully explore and understand the different impacts these have.²² In addition, the reliance on cross-sectional survey data, and a lack of longitudinal data creates difficulties in understanding the interrelationship with other experiences and risk taking more generally.^{23 24}

Nevertheless, a range of research has been undertaken to better explore and understand the different motivations, behaviours and dynamics that comprise the exchange of 'self-generated' sexual material. Research shows that gender (males), older age (of adolescents), sexuality (LGBTQ+) and low socio-economic status predicts a higher likelihood of 'sexting'. However, a number of studies suggest that some groups have more negative experiences, particularly girls (and especially girls from disadvantaged background)²⁶ as well as those from particularly marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ young people.²⁷ A study on 'Teens, 'sexting' and Risks' by the UK charity Internet Matters found that 'vulnerable groups' (children with one or more physical, mental, or social impairments or disabilities) are far more likely to be pressured or blackmailed to share 'nudes'.²⁸ The finding that more excluded and/or minority groups (especially sexual minority groups) are more vulnerable to the pressure to send sexual images and its negative consequences has been replicated across a number of studies across a range of countries.^{29 30 31}

22 Krieger MA. Unpacking "'sexting'": A Systematic Review of Nonconsensual 'sexting' in Legal, Educational, and Psychological Literatures. *Trauma Violence Abuse*. 2017 Dec;18(5):593-601. doi: 10.1177/1524838016659486. Epub 2016 Jul 19. PMID: 27436858.

23 Investigating Risks and Opportunities in a Digital World, Innocenti Discussion paper 2020-03.

24 'sexting' and the Definition Issue - Yara Barrense-Dias, André Berchtold, Joan-Carles Surís, and Christina Akre (2017) *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61, 544-554.

25 Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World. Innocenti Discussion Paper 2020-03

26 Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

27 Revealing Reality Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

28 Look at me: Teens, 'sexting', and Risks (Internet Matters, 2021) Accessed from <https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Internet-Matters-Look-At-Me-Report-1.pdf> 06/05/2021311

29 An Exploratory Study of 'sexting' Behaviours Among Hetero-sexual and Sexual Minority Early Adolescents (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019) Accessed from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31473082/> 14/05/2021310

30 Heterosexual, Cisgender and Gender and Sexually Diverse Adolescents' 'sexting' Behaviors: The Role of Body Appreciation *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* volume 51, pages 278-290 (2022)

31 'sexting', pressured 'sexting' and image-based sexual abuse among a weighted-sample of heterosexual and LGB-youth *Computers in Human Behavior* Volume 117, April 2021, 106630

Images shared without consent

Research shows that the non-consensual experience of having images shared onwards without consent or sharing images onwards is a relatively mainstream element of the experience of 'sexting' among children and young people. A substantial statistical meta-analysis of 39 studies from multiple countries (22 in the United States, 12 in Europe, 2 in Australia, 1 in Canada, 1 in South Africa, and 1 in South Korea), looking at multiple forms of 'sexting' behaviour (with a total of 110,380 participants between the ages of 11-17) found that prevalence overall has increased,³² and increases as youth age.³³ The statistical summary of these studies found that 14.8% of youths report sending and 27.4% percent of youths receiving 'sexts'. It also finds that 12.0% have forwarded a 'sext' without consent and 8.4% have had their 'sext' forwarded without consent.

Gender differences

The finding that girls are more vulnerable to negative experiences in relation to 'sexting' has been replicated across a number of qualitative research studies.^{34 35 36 37 38} These find that girls are more likely to be victims of coercive 'sexting' practices and put under unwanted pressure to send a 'sext'.³⁹ One study describes how "girls were commonly judged harshly whether they sexted (e.g. 'slut') or not (e.g. 'prude') whereas boys were virtually immune from criticism regardless".⁴⁰ Girls were motivated by a desire for approval and social acceptance or even "fear they would lose their boyfriends".⁴¹ Other studies that explore gender inequality identify the perception among young people that boys are entitled to view and share images of girls, and this is endorsed by male peers - whilst girls are still perceived as responsible for what happens to their images.⁴²

32 The year of study data collection demonstrated increase in the prevalence of sending a sext over time. Study publications ranged between the years 2009 and 2016.

33 Madigan S, Ly A, Rash CL, Van Ouytsel J, Temple JR. Prevalence of multiple forms of 'sexting' behavior among youth: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2018;172 (4): 327-335 [PubMed]

34 Burén, Jonas & Lunde, Carolina. (2018). 'sexting' Among Adolescents: A Nuanced and Gendered Online Challenge for Young People. *Computers in Human Behavior.* 85. 10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.003.

35 How do adolescents experience 'sexting' in dating relationships? Motivations to 'sext' and responses to 'sexting' requests from dating partners - Lauren A. Reed, Margaret P. Boyer, Haley Meskunus, Richard M. Tolman and L. Monique Ward (2020) *Children and Youth Services Review*, 109.

36 Physically distant, virtually close: Adolescents' 'sexting' behaviours during a strict lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic - Chelly Maes, Laura Vandenbosch (2022) *Computers in Human Behaviour.*

37 <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Investigating-Risks-and-Opportunities-for-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf>

38 ECPAT (2021) "Everything that is not a yes is a no" A report about children's everyday exposure to sexual crimes and their protective strategies.

39 Kernsmith, P. D., Victor, B. G., & Smith-Darden, J. P. (2018). Online, Offline, and Over the Line: Coercive 'sexting' Among Adolescent Dating Partners. *Youth & Society*, 50(7), 891-904. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X18764040>

40 Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't...If You're a Girl: Relational and Normative Contexts of Adolescent 'sexting' in the United States - Julia R. Lippman & Scott W. Campbell (2014) *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 371-386.

41 'sexting': adolescents' perceptions of the applications used for, motives for, and consequences of 'sexting' - Joris Van Ouytsel, Ellen Van Gool, Michel Walrave, Koen Ponnet & Emilie Peeters (2017) *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(4) 446-470.

42 Setty E (2018) Young People's Attributions of Privacy Rights and Obligations in Digital 'sexting' Culture. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 4533-4552.

A number of in-depth qualitative studies highlight just how sharply gender expectations can shape the practices of 'sexting' for girls. A study based in inner city London schools explores in detail how weighted negative experiences and consequences of 'sexting' are towards girls, and that while 'sexting' may be motivated by sexual pleasure its dynamics are often coercive and linked to bullying and harassment.⁴³ This study finds that:

"Sexting' is not a gender-neutral practice; it is shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, family and school that fail to recognise the problem or to support girls'. The study argues that 'This creates gender specific risks where girls are unable to openly speak about sexual activities and practices, while boys are at risk of peer exclusion if they do not brag about sexual experiences."

The study describes the children as worried, confused and upset about the 'sexting' pressures they face whilst being poorly supported by parents, teachers and others. This study argues that there are oppressive hierarchies around appearance and a damaging commodification of imagery by boys even within peer produced interactions.

Another study in the UK which surveyed over 5000 teenagers challenges the minimisation of 'sexting' as mere 'flirting' where it occurs between children of the same age identifies a broad range of harms that voluntary sexual image exchange introduces for already socially disadvantaged and disempowered girls.⁴⁴ It found that whilst the majority of children 14-16-year-old had not shared a nude image of themselves - only 17 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys had done so. Girls were consistently more likely to have been targeted and asked to share with 34% of girls and 9% of boys asked to share a nude image of themselves when they were 13 or younger.

The study found that, for girls, pressure and social expectation were key factors with 46% of girls who sent a sexual image feeling pressured into it compared to 10% of boys. Girls were more likely to send an image out of feeling the need to prove they were not 'frigid' or to avoid a break-up. Meanwhile, girls were four times more likely to be sent an image of someone they did not know and did not want, and more likely to have images taken without permission and without consent and more likely to have them leaked. Girls from less privileged backgrounds have the worst experiences and suffer the worse consequences. The study found that this group were more likely to have shared because they felt under pressure to do so and less likely to say that it made them feel good about themselves or that they liked having positive comments.

43 A qualitative study of children, young people and "sexting": a report prepared for the NSPCC - Jessica Ringrose, Rosalind Gill, Sonia Livingstone, Laura Harvey (2012) National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London UK.

44 Revealing Reality Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

For the boys in this study, image exchange was often about power status and value exchange with boys more likely to collect them, bait others to send them, and to leak them to their wider friendship group. This study found that leaking 'nudes' had repercussions for girls only and not for boys. Whereas boys gained status as leakers of images girls suffered negative consequences for sharing their images. Other survey studies suggest that while leakers of images are seen as responsible for negative outcomes – significant blame is also levied against the original sharer by both boys and girls. In this respect victim blaming attitudes appear to be common among both boys and girls.⁴⁵

LGBTQ+ youth

A range of research suggests sexual minority youth are more vulnerable to 'sexting' behaviour than heterosexual young people. When comparing 'sexting' behaviours between LGB and heterosexual youth, studies show that LGB adolescents are more likely to have ever taken, sent or received a 'sexting' image. LGB youth are also at higher risk to have experienced 'sexting' pressure.^{46 47} Some studies suggest that LGBTQ adolescents potentially feel freer to express their own sexuality through 'sexting' rather than offline under scrutiny of heterosexual peers. It also offers these youth the opportunity to explore and establish their own sexual identity, which they are less likely to have the opportunity to do offline.⁴⁸

'Sexting' and mental health

A recent overview study that considers the research on 'sexting' and depression identifies a positive association between depressive symptoms and 'sexting' behaviour.⁴⁹ However, not all the research finds this association with an important caveat being around definitions used in different studies (as explored above) and the difficulty in disentangling the different experiences of consensual and non-consensual 'sexting'. Overall, the review found that 12

45 https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_SG-CSAM_Monitoring_2021.pdf This study found that in 2021, minors remained less likely to blame the person in the photo (40%) and more likely to blame the resharer (60%) in instances involving non consensually reshared imagery, across most age, gender, sexuality, and ethnic demographics

46 'sexting', pressured 'sexting' and image-based sexual abuse among a weighted-sample of heterosexual and LGB-youth – Joris Van Ouytsel, Michel Walrave, Lieven De Marez, Bart Vanhaelewyn, Koen Ponnet (2021) 117, Computers in Human Behaviour.

47 An Exploratory Study of 'sexting' Behaviours Among Hetero-sexual and Sexual Minority Early Adolescents (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019) Accessed from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31473082/> 14/05/2021

48 "It's not just sexy pics": An investigation into 'sexting' behaviour and behavioural problems in adolescents – Mairead Foody, Angela Mazzone, Derek Alan Laffan, Magnus Loftsson, James O'Higgins Norman (2021) Computers in Human Behaviour, 117.

49 Part of the differences may relate to inclusion of consensual and non-consensual 'sexting' – the review uses Wolak and Finkelhor's conceptual framework of 'sexting'. According to these authors' typology, 'sexting' behaviors can be divided into two broad categories: aggravated 'sexting' and experimental 'sexting'. Aggravated 'sexting' behaviors encompass all types of 'sexting' that may involve criminal or abusive elements beyond the creation, sending or possession of youth-produced sexual content, including (1) adult involvement; or (2) criminal or abusive behavior by minors. On the other hand, experimental 'sexting' behaviors comprise those instances that do not include abuse or coercion, whereby teens voluntarily took pictures of themselves to create flirting or romantic interest in others. See Wolak, J.; Finkelhor, D. 'sexting': A Typology; Research Center Crimes Against Children University New Hampshire: Durham, NH, USA, 2011. [[Google Scholar](#)]

out of 14 studies noted a positive association between 'sexting' and depressive symptoms. Out of 8 studies looking at the link to anxiety, seven affirmed a positive association with anxiety. The review acknowledges that the evidence is difficult to assess conclusively and that the relationship with depression and anxiety may be bi-directional with depressive symptoms predicting 'sexting' but also potentially being an outcome of those symptoms. As above, this relationship will also be impacted and mediated by the presence of pressure, coercion, bullying or victimisation.⁵⁰

An earlier literature review found significant relationships between 'sexting' and risky sexual behaviours and other adverse outcomes, such as the sharing of sexual content without consent, legal consequences, and negative mental health repercussions.⁵¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, research highlights an existing relationship between mental health or psychological health and online victimisation experiences, such as cyberbullying⁵², online dating violence or so-called 'revenge porn', which relate to and overlap with some non-consensual experiences of 'sexting'.⁵³ ⁵⁴ There is also an association between these experiences and suicide and having suicidal thoughts.⁵⁵

COVID-19 lockdowns

A recent theme to emerge from the literature is the potential impact of COVID-19 lockdowns. One study survey for 543 participants aged 12-18 based in Belgium explored the prevalence of 'sexting' during the pandemic. It found the prevalence to be high with 40.9% of the adolescents engaged in at least one type of 'sexting' and 'arousal needs' given as the most common reasons to 'sext'.⁵⁶ Analysis and discussion suggests 'sexting' became a way of dealing with emerging sexual feelings when denied intimate contact⁵⁷ and suggests it was also a way to deal with boredom and loneliness during a strict lockdown period.⁵⁸

Further components of the research literature can be found at Annex 2. These explore research relating to the impact of digital design, policy and professional responses to 'self-generated' sexual material, what is known about effective educational approaches and what is known about parental responses.

50 Medrano, J.L.J.; Lopez Rosales, F.; Gámez-Guadix, M. Assessing the links of 'sexting', cybervictimization, depression, and suicidal ideation among university students. *Arch. Suicide Res.* 2018, 22, 153-164. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

51 Klettke, B.; Hallford, D.J.; Mellor, D.J. 'sexting' prevalence and correlates: A systematic literature review. *Clin. Psychol. Rev.* 2014, 34, 44-53.

52 Fahy, A.E.; Stansfeld, S.A.; Smuk, M.; Smith, N.R.; Cummins, S.; Clark, C. Longitudinal associations between cyberbullying involvement and adolescent mental health. *J. Adolesc. Health* 2016, 59, 502-509. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[CrossRef](#)]

53 Drouin, M.; Ross, J.; Tobin, E. 'sexting': A new, digital vehicle for intimate partner aggression? *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 2015, 50, 197-204. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[CrossRef](#)]

54 Bates, S. Revenge porn and mental health: A qualitative analysis of the mental health effects of revenge porn on female survivors. *Fem. Criminol.* 2017, 12, 22-42. [[Google Scholar](#)] [[CrossRef](#)]

55 Medrano, J.L.J.; Lopez Rosales, F.; Gámez-Guadix, M. Assessing the links of 'sexting', cybervictimization, depression, and suicidal ideation among university students. *Arch. Suicide Res.* 2018, 22, 153-164.]

56 Physically distant, virtually close: Adolescents' 'sexting' behaviours during a strict lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic - Chelly Maes, Laura Vandenbosch (2022) *Computers in Human Behaviour*.

57 How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting our sexualities? An overview of the current media narratives and research hypotheses. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2020), pp. 1-14, [10.1007/s10508-020-01790-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01790-z)

58 Common Sense Media 2020

Research on the impact of online services and digital design

There is evidence to suggest that one of the drivers to sexual image exchange among children is their exposure to sexual content and sexualised interactions when they are online, and its relative normalisation in their online lives. Studies have suggested that children and young people's exposure to sexualised and pornographic imagery from a relatively young age may shape and interlink with adolescent developmental norms and drive toward risk taking.⁵⁹ A study of Dutch adolescents and young adults found that adolescent girls who uploaded sexualised picture of themselves on social media were more likely to engage in 'sexting'.⁶⁰ Research suggests that some image sharing may represent a child or young persons, way of responding to the pressures and expectations of being online, related to their sexual self-concept and linked to the volume of social media they consume.⁶¹

Recent studies have also shed light upon young people's early and widespread exposure to pornography both through social media and pornography sites⁶² showing the ways in which this shapes children and young people's attitudes and expectations and fosters aggressive and coercive attitudes towards women and girls in their sexual relationships. The widespread exposure to adult pornography appears to normalise and desensitise children and young people to harmful sexual practices with girls disproportionately being the victim of receiving unwanted 'self-generated' sexual material. Research suggests that this contributes to the normalisation and desensitisation to harm sexual practices such as routinely receiving unsolicited sexual images.⁶³

An important UK study on digital design explores how the deliberate design of major social platforms shapes children's consumption of content when they are online.⁶⁴ The research found that children's accounts can receive sexual and harmful content (and requests for adult contact) within hours of being online, despite being registered as children. The authors describe this in the following ways:

59 Rhyner KJ, Uhl CA, Terrance CA. Are Teens Being Unfairly Punished? Applying the Dual Systems Model of Adolescent Risk-Taking to 'sexting' Among Adolescents. *Youth Justice*. 2018;18(1):52-66. doi:10.1177/1473225417741227

60 van Oosten, J. M. F., & Vandenbosch, L. (2017). Sexy online self-presentation on social network sites and the willingness to engage in 'sexting': A comparison of gender and age. *Journal of Adolescence*, 54, 42-50.

doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.11.006

61 Piotr S. Bobkowski, Autumn Shafer, Rebecca R. Ortiz, Sexual intensity of adolescents' online self-presentations: Joint contribution of identity, media consumption, and extraversion, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 58, 2016, Pages 64-74, ISSN 0747-5632, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.009>.

62 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young People and pornography Children's Commissioner for England 2023

63 Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva (2022) Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations.

64 Pathways How Digital Design puts Children at Risk (5Rights Foundation)

"The interviews with design professionals reveal the commercial objectives that put innovators under pressure to produce features that maximise time spent, maximise reach and maximise activity. These features shape children's behaviour. They make it hard for children to put down their devices ("I kept turning it off and then going back and still using it" - Lara, 13). They push network growth to the extent that children find themselves introduced to inappropriate adults, often with provocative or sexual content ("Old men and that sort of thing" - James, 14). And they encourage children to post, share and enhance to such a degree that many children feel that their 'real selves' are inadequate ("All my photos have filters... they make you look prettier" - Carrie, 17)."

One consequence of the fact that commercially driven platforms are structured to reward the engagement of users, is that certain kinds of behaviours are rewarded more than others e.g. 'sexy' content gets more views, shares and likes.⁶⁵ This can shape children's decision making and self-understanding about how they are valued and how they should value themselves. A clear risk is that this can play into how sex offenders seek to groom and manipulate children online - offering praise and attention to children as part of the grooming process.

Professional and educational responses

Confusion around assessment and appropriate response

Whilst there is increasing clarity and understanding about the serious nature of online child sexual exploitation and how it should be managed, research suggests that police, social work, and educational responses to the harmful onward sharing of consensually produced images can be patchy and inconsistent. This continues to create resource challenges for law enforcement and other professionals while there is a lack of clarity around what a proportionate legal, educational or child protection response looks like for these activities.⁶⁶

Within research that has explored this topic there is recognition of the importance of working with children to define appropriate responses. One UK study exploring this concluded that children want protection and non-judgemental support, reassurance and privacy for the victim, and discussion of bullying and disrespectful behaviour with the perpetrator. This was felt to rely on a greater shared understanding between children and adults so that that interventions were non-judgemental and non-blaming toward the victim and would not result in their punishment or having their phone taken away.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ <https://www.weprotect.org/blog/'self-generated'-sexual-content-involving-young-people-demands-understanding-and-nuance/>

⁶⁶ Ethel Quayle, Laura Cariola, Management of non-consensually shared youth-produced sexual images: A Delphi study with adolescents as experts, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Volume 95, 2019, 104064, ISSN 0145-2134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104064>.

⁶⁷ *ibid*

A further complexity for interventions is determining what behaviours are truly 'voluntary' between peers, and much of the research on "sexting" challenges this binary in terms of the level of consent that exists in relationships where unequal power relations are being used to apply pressure or expectation as part of an intimate relationship, with some vulnerable adolescents not necessarily able or willing to identify unhealthy relationships or relate to the behaviour as coercive. It is also the case that some online sexual behaviours such as persistent 'sexting' may not be coerced by another person but can be the result of harmful experiences or previous trauma - with those involved still needing intervention or support⁶⁸.

Professional uncertainty

A recent Canadian study looked at how 'youth-produced sexual imagery' is a complex social phenomenon that can be difficult to fit within existing professional expertise⁶⁹. The study explores these issues with professionals working on child sexual abuse, from law enforcement, child protection and mental health, and it found that professionals struggled to identify where specific support or legal intervention was appropriate given the changing nature of children's sexual agency in the online environment, and broader cultural shifts and generational differences. There was also a lack of clarity around the roles of different practitioners, who should lead, what resources should be used, and how to help young people navigate this aspect of their adolescence. In general, there was a view there was too much police involvement and an assumption that policing should lead the response was harmful in diverting time that could be spent tackling serious adult offenders. There was also a potential misunderstanding that 'technical expertise' should be a requirement to deal with casework leading some professionals to distance themselves from involvement.

Criminalisation risks

It is important to note that there is a growing international consensus on the need to avoid the criminalisation of children and young people for sharing their own images or sexual material depicting themselves. In 2019 the Council of Europe Lanzarote Committee published an opinion on '*child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children.*'⁷⁰ This opinion identified that children should not be convicted for possession or voluntary sharing of sexual images and should only be criminally prosecuted as a last resort - with priority given to measures to deal with the harmful behaviour such as educational or therapeutic support. The opinion aimed to persuade countries not to prosecute children when they were sharing their own explicit images.

68 The Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) Project By Nina Vaswani, Lindsay Mullen, Erifili Efthymiadou and Stuart Allardyce June 2022

69 Andrea Slane, Jennifer Martin & Jonah R. Rimer (2021) Views and Attitudes about Youth Self-Produced Sexual Images among Professionals with Expertise in Child Sexual Abuse, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 30:2, 207-229, DOI: 10.1080/10538712.2021.1875095

70 Lanzarote Committee COE opinion from 2019: [Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children](#) The opinion aims at encouraging countries not to prosecute children when sharing their own explicit images.

UNICEF's 2022 review *Legislating for the Digital Age* also identifies that criminalisation of children for any kind of private use should be avoided and only in exceptional circumstances where children are clearly blackmailing or coercing other children or sharing their images onwards may they face prosecution, but *only* in the children's justice system according to child-friendly justice principles, *and, as per* the Lanzarote convention – as a last resort. This is described in the report as follows:

Under international and regional standards, child recipients of 'self-generated' sexual content by other children may be prosecuted for offences relating to child sexual abuse material in certain circumstances provided that the child is handled in the child justice system according to child-friendly justice principles (see further below on the child justice system)⁷¹. These circumstances include the following:

- *The child coerces, blackmails or otherwise places undue pressure on another child to produce or share 'self-generated' sexual content;*
- *The child, with knowledge and intention, procures or obtains access to 'self-generated' sexual content by another child beyond or without the volition and consent of the child who is the subject of the material;*
- *The child shares (for example, distributes, disseminates, exports, offers or sells) 'self-generated' sexual content of another child.*

The report goes on to note:

This is a complex area, with international and regional standards aiming to strike a balance between the evolving capacities of the child and the protection of children from exploitation and abuse. In sum, as a general rule, children should not be prosecuted for offences related to 'self-generated' sexual images. However, in the circumstances outlined above, prosecution may be permitted where other alternative measures are not appropriate, in line with international child justice standards (see further below on the minimum standards concerning the child justice system).

Some studies make the case that all exchange between peers (including non-consensual exchange) should be decriminalised with criminalisation only applying to adults. Reviews of professional perspectives tend to show a preference for deterrence, education, and awareness rather than legal means to deal with the issues⁷². There is also evidence of success for diversionary approaches.⁷³

71 *Legislating for the Digital Age* (2022) Global Guide on improving legislative frameworks to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse <https://www.unicef.org/reports/legislating-digital-age> p66

72 A. Dodge et al. Online sexual violence, child pornography or something else entirely? Police responses to non-consensual intimate image sharing among youth, *Social & Legal Studies* (2018)

73 Vaswani, N., Mullen, L., Efthymiadou, E., and Allardyce, S. (2022) *The Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) project* The Faithfull Papers

Global evidence of effective approaches to prevention and risk reduction

Framing 'sexting' in education responses

The research on 'sexting' reflects some division over the degree to which 'sexting' is part of normal sexual development and sexual practices and the degree to which it is a negative or dangerous behaviour.⁷⁴ This has been described as the 'deviancy discourse' as opposed to the 'normalcy' discourse in which 'sexting' is part of legitimate sexual relationships.⁷⁵ Some researchers argue that 'sexting', like other risky behaviours, can play a legitimate role in adolescent development and allow adolescents to fulfil certain developmental tasks.⁷⁶ However, a number of studies have also explored in greater depth some of the potential inequalities of experience that children face in the power dynamics of image exchange and question the extent to which we should allow this practice to be regarded as harmless 'flirting' even if for some children it creates no obvious negative consequences and might even enhance the wellbeing of some individuals.⁷⁷ Thinking about the role of 'sexting' in creating problematic volumes of child sexual abuse material also underlines many of the harm aspects.

However, understanding children and young people's motivations for engaging in 'sexting' is an important starting point in encouraging them to engage in behaviours that will help to keep them healthy and safe. A number of studies have often been critical of the focus of educational initiatives as victim-blaming⁷⁸, and argue that this exacerbates the barriers for children and young people to disclose or seek help.⁷⁹

Research suggests that although professionals may regard 'sexting' as a problematic behaviour in many contexts, there is value in avoiding a blame and shame dynamic and prioritising safety over insisting on abstinence. An overview study of 'sexting' risk prevention approaches found that in an analysis of 10 online educational campaigns (from Australia, the US and Europe), such campaigns typically rely on scare scenarios, emphasise the risk of bullying and criminal prosecution, engage in female victim-blaming, and recommend complete abstinence from 'sexting'.⁸⁰ This study looks at the increased prevalence and

74 See Yara Barrenese-Dias et al, 2022.

75 Ibid Doring (2014)

76 Van Quytzel, Joris, et al. "'sexting': Adolescents' perceptions of the applications used for, motives for, and consequences of 'sexting'." *Journal of Youth Studies* 20.4 (2017): 446-470.

77 Revealing Reality Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people, See also Reed et al (2020)

78 Beatrice Sciacca, Angela Mazzone, James O'Higgins Norman, Mairéad Foody, Blame and responsibility in the context of youth produced sexual imagery: The role of teacher empathy and rape myth acceptance, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 103, 2021, 103354,

79 Beatrice Sciacca, Angela Mazzone, James O'Higgins Norman, Mairéad Foody, Blame and responsibility in the context of youth produced sexual imagery: The role of teacher empathy and rape myth acceptance, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 103, 2021, 103354,

80 Consensual 'sexting' among adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer 'sexting'? - Nicola Döring (2014) *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(1), article 9.

normalisation of 'sexting' from a meta-analysis of 50 studies and advocates for a safer sex approach which "a) fosters adolescents' individual skills of resisting peer pressure and making conscious decisions about if, when, how, and with whom to have sex and/or to 'sext' consensually and responsibly, and b) builds a safer environment by taking more effective anti-bullying measures at the school and community levels, and by avoiding punishment and stigmatization for consensual age-appropriate sexual exploration".

This study also points out that many adolescents who already know about possible negative outcomes still engage in 'sexting', and that teenagers themselves exchange safer 'sexting' tips (e.g., use of anonymised pictures; or using apps that automatically delete pictures after a couple of seconds). These technical measures can be helpful but have limits (e.g., some "deleted" photos can be retrieved and screenshots can be made). The research demonstrates that youth do themselves engage in moral discourses about consensual and ethical 'sexting' practices (e.g. protection of the 'sexting' partner's privacy) and educational campaigns would have more success if they engaged with young people's own conversations. Other studies also highlight the importance of covering consent and relationship pressure issues in school sex and education classes, emphasising the value of open discussion with children and young people - including exploring relationship dynamics with as much focus on those asking for or demanding images as those sharing them.⁸¹

Evidence that suggests many young people are aware of the risks of 'sexting' but engage in it anyway aligns with other research on online safety education and the need to go beyond explaining online risks to children to offering broad based and consistent safety programmes that include online safety with a strong social and emotional skills components enabling children to resist pressure, empathise, master emotions and to improve healthy and safe decision-making.⁸² Current best practice is recognised to include helping children and young people to build positive healthy relationships and challenge unhelpful relationships and harmful social norms.⁸³ This includes helping children and young people to identify and act in line with their core values, act as a positive bystander in 'sexting' situations, and to challenge harmful gender norms.

Adolescent resistance strategies

Efforts to strengthen educational approaches may also be aided by our understanding of how adolescents respond to implicit and explicit pressure to 'sext' and what counter strategies they use if they do not want to engage in 'sexting'.⁸⁴ A recent study carried out

81 Sending One's Own Intimate Image: 'sexting' Among Middle-School Teens - Yara Barrenese-Dias, Lorraine Chok, Sophie Stadelmann, Andre Berchtold, and Joan-Carles Suris (2022) Journal of School Health, 92(4), 353-360.

82 Finkelhor, D. et, al, (2020) Youth Internet Safety Education: Aligning Programmes With the Evidence Base (unh.edu) Trauma, Violence and Abuse (2020).

83 Building healthy relationships and creating positive cultures a CEOP resource developed in association with clinical psychologist Dr Elly Hanson with <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/resources/respecting-me-you-us/>

84 Lunde, C. & Joelby, M. (2022) Being under pressure to 'sext': Adolescents Experiences, Reactions and Counter Strategies. Journal of Research on Adolescence

with Swedish adolescents identified a wide range of situations in which adolescents report that they can feel under pressure to 'sext' including unexpected requests or unsolicited images being sent to them alongside more obvious pressure such as nagging and threats. The study found that, even if some dynamics do not include overt acts of pressure or coercion, these can be experienced as pressurising. The research stated that some children were able to say no and to 'stand up' for themselves, whilst for others saying no was not an obvious way out but a skill that could be developed over time. Sometimes the ability to say no was innate, and sometimes it was supported by children's knowledge and belief in their own bodily integrity. Some resistance strategies included making threats back or using humour to diffuse the situation. Another core strategy was blocking and knowledge of how to block other users which some adolescents did routinely.⁸⁵

Overall, research appears to show that adolescents do feel pressure within contexts that do not explicitly appear coercive and that many of them already use concrete strategies for saying no which can be built on by educational strategies. These of course are likely to be impacted by specifics of the relationship dynamics and harmful gender norms they experience.

Caregiver responses

Recent research underscores the value of educating and informing parents so that they can contribute to the prevention and safety responses to this issue.⁸⁶ A recent study which surveyed 2,000 US caregivers to explore their role in supporting and improving the resilience of children and young people to deal with 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material⁸⁷ found that caregivers tend to generalise talks about online safety with their kids at the expense of explicit discussions that can help kids recognise and navigate the distinct risks and pathways of grooming and 'sharing nudes'. It found that while two in three caregivers had talked with their child about social media and digital safety, fewer than one in three caregivers had talked with their child specifically about 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material. Other key findings include that parents perceived girls to be more at risk but also bearing more responsibility if things go wrong and parents were more likely to blame girls if their images are leaked than they are to blame boys. It also found that parents often perceived their own children would never engage with 'self-generated' sexual material or were too young to do so. Alongside this, a belief their own lack of knowledge would often inhibit them talking directly about these issues with their children. Importantly, the study noted that not all children have access to engaged and informed caregivers who can help protect them from these risks.

85 This finding aligns with the recent Thorn survey which found that children prefer to block other users than seek offline support. *Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspective on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021*, Thorn's research found that Blocking tools remain kids' most used online safety feature in controlling potentially harmful online interactions. 68% of kids in their survey of 1141 9-17-year-olds blocked users when experiencing potentially harmful online interactions, while 50% used a reporting feature, 23% muted the users, and just 15% ignored them.

86 The Role of Caregivers: Safeguarding & Enhancing Youth Resilience Against Harmful Sexual Encounters Online Findings from qualitative and quantitative SG-CSAM research among parents and guardians in 2021

87 This is defined as explicit imagery of a child that appears to have been taken by the child in the image. This imagery can result from both consensual or coercive experiences.