# Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse

## ROBERT summary report for everyone
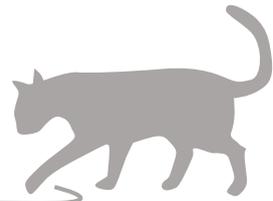
RISKTAKING ONLINE BEHAVIOUR
EMPOWERMENT THROUGH
RESEARCH AND TRAINING

**ROBERT**

# The ROBERT project

The aim of the ROBERT project (Risk-taking Online Behaviour – Empowerment through Research and Training) has been to understand how and why online contacts sometimes lead to sexual abuse or rape. The ROBERT project aims to provide better information for young people on how to navigate safely online.

The work in the ROBERT project has been made possible through co-funding from the EU Safer Internet Programme and has taken place over a two-year period. During this time the project has:

- Collected research on online sexual abuse of children (Research[1])
- Interviewed victims of online sexual abuse. (Interviews)
- Held focus groups with young people. (Focus groups)
- Interviewed perpetrators of online sexual abuse against children. (Perpetrators)

The ROBERT team has included researchers, child psychologists and psychiatrists, clinical social workers and NGO experts. The work has taken place in consultation with young people, child protection experts, law enforcement agencies, pedagogical experts and child psychiatry institutions.

The ROBERT project has published four reports. This is a summary that we hope will be of use to everyone.

*"If you log on and call yourself something special… like Jessica 15 there are loads of them. Guys write to you. You'll get loads of proposals." [2]*

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[1] In this report we will attribute some statements to our research report, some to our interviews with young people, some to our focus group interviews and some to our interviews with online sex offenders. The words in parenthesis will show what we base our statements on.

[2] All quotes are from interviews made with young people victims of online sexual abuse or young people interviewed in focus groups.

# Online sexual abuse – the risk for young people

At some point in their lives, half of all European teenagers have been subjected to sexual harassment or solicitation online and a substantial number more than once. Many young people have themselves sent sexy images and even more have received them. Requests from adults and other young people for sexual activity online, such as posing in front of a webcam, are not always seen as being unwanted or a problem. It would appear that the older you get the more suggestions for sexual meetings or requests to send sexy pictures you will receive. (Research)

Many young people interviewed for the ROBERT project chat about sexual matters with online contacts. Most, however, have strategies for staying safe online, so that the chat does not turn into something that is unwanted. Many young people avoid spreading personal information to people they do not know. Other safety measures include avoiding particular sites, checking identity and blocking communication. (Focus groups)

In most cases, taking safety measures are sufficient to avoid further risks of sexual abuse – but not always. This report is based on interviews with young people that have experienced online sexual abuse. Other interviews were carried out with young persons in residential care, young people with some form of disability such as hearing impairment or learning difficulties. Other focus group participants interviewed were lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people. Finally, some were just young people in general.

## When are young people at risk of online sexual abuse?

For most young people at risk, something feels wrong with their lives, or something is missing that going online makes better. They hope to deal with bad things in life and want to be understood. Online they have a space of their own to do things in their own way and also to explore sex. They feel that this offers opportunity to take control over their lives. They often seek ways online to deal with feelings of loneliness, or to help them feel better about themselves.

For the young people interviewed, there were times in their lives when they felt vulnerable. They might have had difficult experiences in the past or felt that they were not being listened to or understood. Some felt a need to find out more about their own sexuality in ways that cannot be done IRL. (Interviews). Young people who feel lonely more often chat online about personal and intimate subjects. Lonely and frightened adolescents at times prefer online meetings to IRL meetings and feel that this is easier. (Research)

## Are some young people more at risk of online sexual abuse?

Girls are 2–4 times more likely to be targeted for online sexual requests and suggestions than boys.

Boys use the Internet more frequently for sex than girls. Boys also chat more often about sex and have more sex contacts online than girls. Boys are more likely than girls to show themselves naked in front of the webcam or have sex using the webcam. (Research)

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender involves a higher risk of receiving sexual questions or being asked for sexy images. (Research). There are, however, no studies that indicate that young LGBT people are harmed more often online. LGBT people are often aware that they need to be careful online. When meetings are arranged these are in public places with other people around. (Focus groups). This seems important because to be able to speak with trusted people (friends, parents, teachers) about such experiences is essential. Telling friends about bad experiences is a good way to stay safe and helps others as well.

Studies show that young people with some form of disability suffer more sexual abuse offline than other groups. (Research). Whether this also applies to the online world is unclear. Online contacts are valuable to many young people with disabilities as the technology can put them on equal footing with others. A person with, for example, a hearing impairment can just as easily chat online. Young people with learning disabilities and special needs may have difficulties understanding that people are not always honest online and this may impact on their methods of staying safe online. (Focus groups).

Some of the young people in residential care that were interviewed seemed to be less aware than other young people of the negative consequences of posting their own pictures or their friend's pictures online, particularly those taken for fun or with a sexual content. (Focus groups).

Some studies indicate that young people originally from another country may be more at risk of being approached online by adults that want to meet them for sex. Young people with a background in another country are not used to the customs of the new country and may therefore not know exactly how to respond. (Research).

## Awareness of online risks

Young people are generally aware of online risks. Some accept a level of risk as inevitable online but that it can be managed. Others consider being online as dangerous. Young people know that giving out personal email addresses and phone

numbers or posting pictures online can lead to problems. (Research).

Our focus groups suggested that young people who have experience of life in care, either in an institution or in other care, believe that young people who live in large cities and live with their family are more at risk of being sexually abused online than young people in institutions or those that live in smaller communities. (Focus groups).

## What may put you at risk online?

### Being sad and lonely

The link between feeling sad and sexual requests is unclear. Young people that feel unhappy are more likely to respond when asked sexual questions or receive sexual requests. (Research). Adults wanting to meet with young people for sex said in their interviews that they can recognise this in young people and send more such questions to them. These adults take advantage of the young person's need for contact and act as a friend or offer support to come close to the young person. (Perpetrators).

Some of the young people that post sexy images of themselves online or that use the webcam for sex may feel that they do not belong anywhere. When asked they seem to worry more than others. Young people with low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem might more often answer a sexy request. (Research).

*"… she was out in the evenings, she'd be out during the day, she didn't bother to go to work, and couldn't even care less about not earning a living. And so she was glad to see me sitting in front of the computer, because she could then say: 'you see what a good girl she is, she never does anything or goes anywhere, she doesn't get on my nerves or make me angry"*

(Girl victim of online sexual abuse)

### Family situation

Our interviews and research suggest that where families have been disrupted, through relationships falling apart or because of illness, the young people involved may be more vulnerable and at risk of someone contacting them for sex online. (Research). (Interviews).

### Previous abuse

Young people that have been sexually abused before seem to be at higher risk of receiving online sexual requests. Some children that have been abused also themselves show sexually aggressive behaviour online towards other young people.

Girls that have been sexually abused receive more questions about sex online and are more often asked for sexy pictures. Those young people who voluntarily present themselves online in a sexy way do too. (Research).

### Selling sex

Research studies from some countries have showed that a small number of young people who sell sex do so online. However, very few young people actually sell sex and using the Internet does not seem to encourage more young people to sell sex. Those selling sex may have a number of problems in their lives and often feel as if they belong nowhere. Young people selling sex are more often physically threatened, use more drugs and drink more alcohol. (Research). In our interviews, those that did sell sex, said that they did so to earn money and described encounters as sometimes good and sometimes bad. (Interviews).

## Sex online and the link to sexual abuse

### Pornography online

Watching pornography online is common among young people, even though they occasionally find images disgusting or difficult to watch. Boys seem to access pornography more often than girls and it seems to differ from one country to another in how common it is. (Research).

### Chatting online about sex

As many as one in five young people admit that they have chatted online about sex and enjoyed the experience. Some experts believe that discussing sex online can actually protect young people. But chatting about sex online with strangers can also be dangerous. (Research).

Young LGBT people and young men often use Internet to find out more about sex. They also go online to find friends and sexual partners. They are more likely than other groups of young people to arrange offline meetings following online contacts. (Focus groups).

## Naked online

A small number of young people show themselves naked or nearly naked online. Around one in ten older teens has posted sexy pictures of themselves. Slightly more young people exhibit themselves in a sexy way – 12 per cent of boys and 16 per cent of girls according to some studies. (Research).

## Sexuality online

In our interviews with young people who were sexually abused online, they said that they were aware, or suspected, that they were meeting the adult person for sex. Some had previous sexual experiences and all – including younger teenagers – were curious about what might happen at the meeting.

None of them described themselves as 'victims'. Some claimed that it is wrong to view young people as innocent and vulnerable and emphasised the need to accept their sexuality. (Interviews).

## Sending sexy messages

Sexting – sending and receiving sexy messages or images – is a part of the online sexual behaviour of some young people. To some it is problematic and some will say it is not. Recent research has suggested that young people do talk about sending these kinds of images and texts and, oddly, many more talk about receiving them. (Research).

## Webcam sex

Young people sometimes accept being asked for sex online, such as showing yourself naked or nearly naked in front of the webcam. Boys are more likely than girls to pose in front of the webcam. (Research).

Using a webcam is important to many young people. Those living away from home use it to communicate with their friends and families. The technology is also a means of having face-to-face communication, while for some young people it also opens up opportunities for sex. (Focus groups).

# Online grooming

## Grooming and online manipulation

Adults that wish to meet young people for sex use different ways to get in contact with them. There are examples where girls have been offered attractive jobs as performers or models. (Interviews). (Research).

Being in touch online with others (often adults) without parental knowledge might be associated with young people feeling more grown-up and in control of their lives. As these contacts become more and more intense, with an increasing number of messages being passed, the relationship becomes stronger and more difficult to control or to end. This contact with someone who is interested in a sexual relationship with a young person is maintained in different ways: via online chats, text messages and regular phone calls (usually to a mobile phone). In some cases this will end up with a request for a face-to-face meeting. (Interviews).

## Lying and keeping secrets

In our interviews young people who had met someone online often talked about the need to lie to their parents about who they were in contact with or where they had been. Very often this was prompted by the adult met online, who insisted that their contact must be kept secret. Lying was difficult, but was necessary in order to stay in contact with this adult. Since they had lied, the young person often felt especially bad and blamed themselves for the sexual abuse that then happened. Keeping secrets from parents is something that most adolescents do, and amongst other things is a way of becoming independent. Young people talked about feeling bad about telling lies as they considered this different from keeping secrets. (Interviews).

Some of the offenders interviewed used some form of deception in their contacts with young people. They might have lied about their age, or what they looked like. (Perpetrators). However, most of the young people that we interviewed considered that they were in a relationship and that part of this relationship was going to be sexual. This was both exciting and confusing and was often seen as romantic. When the relationship is perceived as romantic, feelings may be particularly powerful and difficult to handle. Some young people considered that the relationship would have been accepted by others had the age difference not been there, but it was unclear whether this was what they had been told by the adult involved. (Interviews).

## Losing control

Adults often convinced young people from the outset that this was an important relationship and that they would stay close to them. In several of these relationships, young people described how happy they felt and relieved to have found somebody to feel close to. This might be because they felt sad about their parents' divorce or felt left out at school. It therefore felt important that there was someone who understood them and was always available to them. (Interviews). In our interviews offenders talked about how they promised the young person that they would always be there for them. (Perpetrators).

## Initiating offline meetings and initiating contacts online

In our focus groups, boys used more active approaches online and started online conversations more often with unknown people, specifically girls of the same age. Boys were also more likely to arrange meetings offline. Girls were less likely to initiate similar approaches and seemed to do so for other reasons. (Focus groups).

Seeking new friends or contacts online sometimes resulted in offline meetings. The young people interviewed talked about meetings they felt were good and those that clearly went wrong. Going wrong might mean that the person in real life turns out to be older or not as pleasant as his or her online persona. It might also go wrong because something happened that upset or distressed the young person. (Focus groups).

Online communication is a way to retain friends and make new ones. For young lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people and for young people with disabilities, the Internet is also a way to finding others that are they feel are similar to them. (Focus groups).

## Can young people avoid dangers online?

Our research would suggest that young people often think of online contacts as easier to manage than off line ones, and some believe that the online world is less dangerous than the

*"...in my opinion, through a screen you're able to say a lot more than you can to someone's face, even if you are arguing about something, I, personally, find it much easier through the computer, at least for me…"*

(Girl, 17 years)

offline world. The screen provides some protection and, for example, discussing sex online is seen as not as dangerous as doing so in real life. (Focus groups).

Young people often describe online and offline worlds as different. They also see major differences between people you only know online and those you also know in real life. In the main, real life friends are more important. Some young people think that relationships are easier online. Having an argument online, or breaking up a relationship, might be simpler than in real life. (Focus groups).

However, strong, friendly and trustworthy relationships can also be formed with online-only contacts. In most cases, however, young people in our focus groups claimed that they would never develop close and dependable relationships with people they know only online and have never met in person. (Focus groups).

> *"What do you mean by 'difference'? It is the difference between a real person and a computer."*
> (Boy, 16 years, with disability)

## Disclosing online sexual abuse and getting help

Telling others about sexual abuse is nearly always difficult. When sexual abuse occurs in the online world it seems to be even more difficult to talk about and less likely to be reported.

All of the young people interviewed had eventually disclosed the sexual abuse that had occurred, or someone else had discovered the abuse. The fact that some young people had had photographs taken or films made as part of the abuse made it even more difficult to talk about it to other people. (Interviews)

Some young people, however, felt good about speaking to others about the abuse, and found it very helpful. The adults they met showed sympathy and were understanding. One suggestion made by the young people we interviewed was that more adults should be open to discussions about what happens to young people online. At the same time, it seemed important to young people that they were able to decide who was told about the sexual abuse. This left them feeling that they had some control over what was happening. (Interviews)

## Young people should know that:

- it is contacts with people that they have only met online that may become problematic or disturbing

- it is good to pay attention to which people are known both online and offline and which are online only

- adults wanting to meet a young person for sex sometimes succeed in creating an impression that they are connected in more ways than is actually the case

- sharing online experiences, or sequences of events, that are disturbing and problematic, with friends or trusted adults is protective in itself

- it is wise to be cautious if an online-only contact wants you to start texting via a mobile phone, talking on a landline phone or using multiple chat sites

- rules on staying safe online are no different for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT) than others

- other young people, even young people you know IRL, may behave in harmful and/or exploitative ways online

- there may be a link between being a victim of online bullying or identity thefts and becoming a victim of grooming.
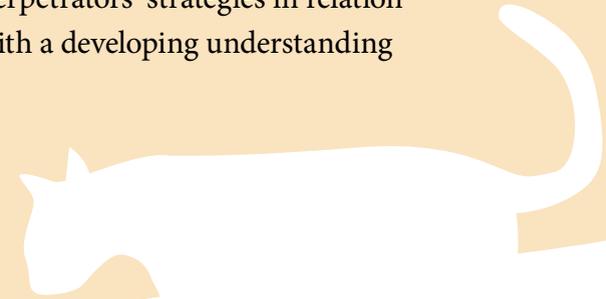
## Learn more
## – speak to someone

In the four ROBERT project reports published, in this summary referred to as (Research), (Interviews), (Focus groups) and (Perpetrators) you can read more about the young people interviewed and about research related to young peoples' online experiences. The reports are available on **www.childcentre.info/Robert**.

If you wish to speak to or email people in your own country with knowledge about young people and sexual abuse online please visit **www.saferinternet.org** where you can click on your country in order to find someone to speak to.

**ROBERT**

ROBERT project´s aim is to make online interaction safe for children and young people. This is to be achieved through learning from experiences of online abuse processes and factors that make young people vulnerable as well as those that offer protection. Perpetrators' strategies in relation to grooming of children online have also been explored along with a developing understanding of how abuse may occur in the online environment.

Children and young people will be empowered by the results so that they can better protect themselves online. Groups of children that may be more at risk specifically benefit from chances of improved self-protection. The ROBERT project is funded by the EU Safer Internet Programme.

Innocence in danger

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