

What is sextortion?

internet
matters.org

Guide to online sexual coercion and extortion of children

Developed with insight from online safety expert, Karl Hopwood, this guide provides in-depth information on 'sextortion' and how to protect children from being targeted.



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Quick links to get help



CEOP website



Report Remove Tool

Take **It** Down

Take it down

Police:

999
(emergency)

111
(non emergency)

The meaning of 'sextortion'

Sextortion describes the crime of threatening to share or distribute intimate images of another person unless the victim does what the perpetrator demands. Perpetrators might ask for the images, record the victim without knowing or create images of them using AI.

While other terms are better, 'sextortion' is more widely recognised. A better phrase would be the 'online sexual coercion and extortion of children'.

Sextortion is illegal and often, but not always, done by criminal gangs. These perpetrators prey on victims' feelings of distress to get what they want. The act of sextortion is meant to intimidate victims and influence them to do what they don't want to do.

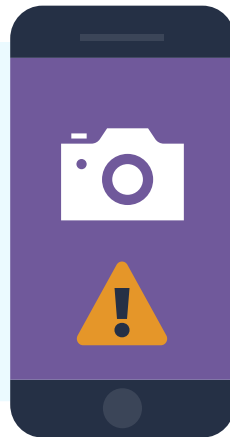
Terms to know

Image sextortion is where the purpose of extortion is to receive indecent images of someone.

Financial sextortion is where the purpose is to gain financially when the victim pays money to stop someone sharing their images.

81%

of teens believe that sharing nudes is always harmful to young people involved.



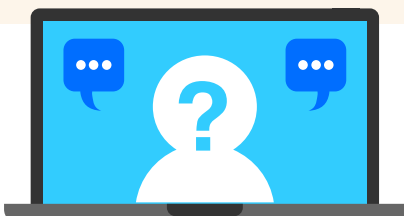
52%

of teens feel that adults don't worry too much about nude-sharing.

Source: Internet Matters' research into online misogyny and image-based abuse

Terms to know

Deepfakes are an AI that can place someone's appearance and/or voice in different contexts. It can make people appear to do or say something they never did.



The impacts of artificial intelligence

[An October 2023 report from the Internet Watch Foundation \(IWF\)](#) found that offenders used generative artificial intelligence (AI) to create sexual images of children and young people.

The IWF's investigation found nearly 3,000 AI images depicting child sexual abuse. Of these, 1,372 images depicted children aged 7-10 and 143 depicted children under 6.

In early 2024, there were also reports of explicit AI-generated images of pop star Taylor Swift. These deepfakes are illegal under the UK's Online Safety Act.

However, with this technology, sextortion criminals have potential new ways to coerce and blackmail young people who haven't shared nude images of themselves.

Self-generated child sexual abuse material

'Self-generated' child sexual abuse material (CSAM) describes indecent imagery produced and shared by children and young people. However, it is an imperfect term.

There are many reasons why a child may choose to take and send sexual images of themselves. These include:

- Consensual sharing in a romantic relationship
- Being pressured, tricked or coerced into sharing an image
- Grooming and exploitation

Once sent, there is a risk that images are shared further, without the subject's consent. For example, the images could be 'leaked' within peer groups or distributed via adult offender networks.

While it is technically true that the child 'generated' a sexual image of themselves, it is important not to imply that they are in any way to blame for their abuse. This is the responsibility of the perpetrator(s).



In 2022, the [Internet Watch Foundation \(IWF\)](#) found 896 coerced child sexual abuse images of the most severe type over a 5-day period. These images were self-generated, and 75% involved 11-13-year-olds.

Recognising the warning signs



For parents & carers...

- **Changes in behaviour.** A child who is victim to sextortion might appear withdrawn, worried, unhappy or otherwise different from their 'normal' self.
- **Avoiding online spaces.** They might stop using their phone or device that they normally enjoy using, or they might appear anxious when notifications or messages appear.

Remember that sextortion regularly takes places on popular social media platforms that kids use every day like Instagram and Snapchat. It happens where young people are, not just on 'dodgy' apps you've never heard of.



For young people...

- **Be suspicious.** If someone shares an intimate image and then asks you to do the same, be suspicious and resist temptation to send anything back.
- **Spot the lies.** In some cases, someone might say they have a naked image of you (even if they don't) and will threaten to release it unless you do what they say. Don't give in; instead, get help.
- **Stay alert.** Remember that not everyone is who they say they are. Even someone using the account or number of a friend from school could be a stranger or someone different. If they start to ask for nude images, stop talking and get help.
- **Be cautious.** If you share a photo or video (or someone records your content), you lose control of it, and it becomes difficult to track.

How to talk about sextortion

As parents/carers, we would like to think that our children would feel like they could come and speak to us about anything troubling them.

Unfortunately, the reality is often quite different -- particularly with technology and digital issues. This is because young people often feel they will be judged by adults, feeling they have little understanding of their digital world.

But difficult conversations will be easier if there is a history of positive dialogue about all sorts of things with your children. It's never too late to start!

Stories in the media can provide an opportunity to start a discussion. Ask them if they heard about an issue and what they think. Do they know anyone who experienced the same thing?



Questions to ask

Talking about things before they become a problem is important. Conversations with our teens about sextortion will help them recognise the behaviour and know how to take action if someone approaches them online.

These questions can help start important conversations:

What sort of things would make you or your friends feel uncomfortable about online?

- Have you heard of sextortion? How can you protect yourself?
- What would you say to a friend who was being sextorted?
- What advice could you give and how could you help them?



Remember

Your child is the victim here. Remind them that they won't get in trouble, and others will neither judge nor blame them.

If they come to you for support, emphasise that they have been really brave in coming forward.

And, reassure them that there are things they can do to take back control.

Learn more

- ▶ [Internet Matters sexting hub](#)
- ▶ [UKCIS Challenge Victim Blaming Language](#)
- ▶ [Thinkuknow Digital Romance report](#)
- ▶ [Thinkuknow Ask the Awkward](#)



Platform safety

When children get their first social media account, it's important to make sure they meet the minimum age requirements and that privacy settings are in place to give the maximum protection.

Safety by design

Many of the more [popular platforms provide a 'safer' experience for users under 18](#) by default. But these only work if a user is honest about their age. Unfortunately, many children who lie about their age, will do so by large margins.

For example, a 10-year-old signing up to TikTok won't often say they're 13. Instead, they'll use their parent's birthday or another birthday that makes them appear as an adult rather than under 18. As such, they miss out on the available safety features for under-18s.

As parents, we shouldn't let our children use social media sites until they are old enough to do so. Then, when they are old enough, we should make use of tools such as the family centres available.
















The table below outlines these features, which cannot work if a child lies about being under 18.

Good to know



Most social media sites, platforms and apps require users to be 13 or older. Being honest about their age will keep them safer.



	Private accounts by default	Direct message limits	Screen time breaks	Family Centre
	 under-16s	 under-16s		
	 under-16s	 requests are text-only		
	 under-18s	 under-18s		

Supporting critical thinking

Our [research with Adrienne Katz and Aiman El Asam](#) found that children and young people who had different vulnerabilities were more likely to be affected by online harms and challenges.

For example, children who were in care (or were young carers) were more likely to be susceptible to cyberscams. Additionally, children with special educational needs were more likely to experience 'sexting under pressure'.

[Additional research](#) found that males and non-heterosexual youth were also more likely to be victims of sextortion.

It's important to discuss sextortion scenarios with young people so they can consider how to respond. Scenario-based learning can also help them think critically about the best ways to deal with these situations.

Emphasise the importance of not forwarding on sexual images or videos if they receive it from someone else. There can be legal consequences as well as emotional impacts on the victim.



Good to know

Most social media sites, platforms and apps require users to be 13 or older. Being honest about their age will keep them safer.

Resources to develop critical thinking skills



Online critical thinking guide



Online peer pressure guide for teens



Nudes and sexting: Advice for young people



Some things make me feel scared



Digital Matters stories

Dispelling the myths

To help children and young people get support, it's important to dispel myths that might keep them from reporting sextortion. Here are some of those myths:



It's my fault for sending the image in the first place

Assure victims they are not at fault. Someone has exploited them. Many people send images for all sorts of reasons, and it's not okay that now someone is betraying your trust by threatening to share the image more widely.

I've created child pornography will get in legal trouble

They are the victim and will not get in legal trouble. The police will pursue the person/people who pressured them into sharing the content in the first place because they are the ones who have committed a crime.

This hasn't happened to anyone else

Sadly, sextortion scams are much more common than you might think. Even though your child might not hear a lot about it, lots of people have experienced the same thing.

The police will have to take my phone away and I'll not get it back

In some cases, the police might need to examine a device to try and establish what happened. This will help them bring the perpetrators to justice. However, you will get your device back as quickly as possible.

To help, it's important to keep any evidence like screen shots of messages and anything that was sent to you; this can help with the investigation.

My parents will never understand

Make sure your child knows that you will always support them, no matter what. Remind them that your prime concern is to make sure they are safe and to help them. People behind sextortion scams depend on victims being too scared to come forward, so let your child know that the door is always open.

Further support

If your child is targeted, contact your local police and, if your child is at school, the Designated Safeguard Lead (DSL). They will be able to help and provide support as well as signpost you to services who can help to deal with what has happened.

The following organisations can also offer support.

Report Remove Tool

Report Remove is a tool for children under 18 in the UK to confidentially report sexual images and videos of themselves which have been shared online. The tool will help to remove these.

Take It Down

Take It Down is a service for anyone to remove online nude, partially nude or sexually explicit photos that were taken before they were 18.

The service works by assigning a unique digital fingerprint (called a hash) to a nude, partially nude or sexually explicit photo or video of someone under 18. Online platforms use the hash value to detect these images and remove them. The hash value is the only thing shared, not the image.

Good to know



It is important to realise that on both Report Remove and Take It Down, any content which is shared on encrypted services or in private messages cannot be removed – but any public or unencrypted services can scan for the hashed image.

Childline

Childline will provide free and confidential support both online and via the phone for anyone under 19.

Young Minds

Young Minds is a mental health charity for children and young people which will offer advice and information 24/7.

More resources and reading



[Sexting advice hub](#)



[Teens' online dating and relationships hub](#)



[Research: Preventing self-generated child sexual abuse material](#)



[Internet Watch Foundation guidance on sextortion](#)



[National Crime Agency: Sextortion](#)



[Met Police: Sextortion](#)



[National Cyber Security Centre: How to protect yourself](#)